

Sketch of the site plan
Richard Meier
& Partners Architects

“MEDIEVAL STREETS
INSPIRED THE
MACBA’S LINEAR
ORGANIZATION”

Conversation with
Richard Meier and Renny Logan

As in any creative field, architects must reconcile their background and experience with the cultural reality of their time. Would you tell us about your training?

After graduating from Cornell University with a degree in architecture I traveled to Israel and then throughout Europe for six months meeting architects and seeing architecture. I carried my portfolio of student work with me. I wanted to work for Le Corbusier, and so I went to France and met him by chance at the opening of the Maison du Brésil which he had designed. He told me that he would not hire an American at the time, so I continued to travel for a while and then returned to the United States and went to work for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill for six months. Then I worked for Marcel Breuer for three years until I opened my own office in 1963. Renny Logan, who was the Project Architect on the MACBA project, has a similar background, having been trained in architecture at Clemson University, in South Carolina, in a program built quietly but solidly in history and the principles of modern architecture. The graduate program provided an opportunity to study and travel in Italy and other parts of Europe for four months, with special opportunities for an American to better appreciate dense urban environments like Paris, Rome, and Barcelona, and the work of Le Corbusier and Alvar Aalto. He began working with me after several years with Charles Gwathmey.

In various occasions, you have referred to assemblage as a constructive process very close to architecture. Besides, your fondness for collage is well-known. “The collage making is his midnight boxing ring” – the architect John Hejduk has written about you –. “It keeps the hand and the eye trained.”

I began making collages in 1959 and continue to do so. I love to make collages. It’s an intuitive exercise that keeps the mind fluid and the eye trained for composition, imagery, and meaning. It is in many ways related to organizing the components of a building program. I do them on airplane trips to pass the time, using found materials and imagery. I have more than 150 notebooks full of them . . . some are better than others.

Unlike other typologies, the architectural conception of a museum should take into account the critical presence of the artwork. Do you regard this dialectical confrontation between the two practices as an added difficulty?



Richard Meier
Untitled, 2005
 Collage, 22.5 x 16 cm
 MACBA Collection
 Fundació Museu d'Art
 Contemporani de Barcelona
 Donated by the artist
 Photo: Tony Coll. Courtesy of
 Museu d'Art Contemporani
 de Barcelona (MACBA)

Very much the contrary. . . art and architecture are complementary in the better museums of the world; the whole experience is made richer through a balanced dialogue between the two. While the museums we have designed may be noted for their singularity and presence, we make simple elegant, utilitarian gallery space for the art. In Barcelona we were investigating the potential for new interactions, not only for the museum, but also new interactions between the art and the architecture of the museum. Contemporary art is boldly unpredictable, whether it be painting, sculpture, video, digital media, prints and photography, or performance art. The scale of some canvases, sculpture, video, and performance installations has become enormous, whether a Kiefer painting, a Serra arc, or an Eliasson installation. If there are forces competing for attention in the design of museums, they involve the disparities between that large-scale work and smaller objects. One interesting goal is to understand and communicate that scale relationship. Different objects should be perceived in different ways, yet an architect cannot assume what particular object or work will be displayed. Fundamentally then, we propose a broad variety of spaces to accommodate those scales, and the unexpected, as we have done at the MACBA. Beyond its potential for mounting exhibitions of existing art, artists soon found fascinating ways of engaging the variety of spaces within the museum through a series of site-specific commissions and/or reimagining their works' presentations. The boundaries between architecture and art have been blurred.

What has been your approach to art?

We've been influenced primarily by painting and sculpture. My early painting, sharing a studio with Frank Stella when we were young, eventually gave way to collages when my practice began to take more time. During the Getty years I became interested in sculpture, ironically working around Frank again at a foundry just outside New York. The Cubism of Picasso, Braque, and Gris, various Constructivist influences from Malevich and Rodchenko, the geometries of modern painters like Mondrian, Frank Stella, and Richard Diebenkorn, as well as Rothko's simple proportions and subtle mastery of color have all influenced our intuitive thinking about how to make elegant buildings. Digesting a complex building program is intuitively an effort to create order out of chaos, to express the nature of its meaning in a

particular configuration, and to further refine and balance the various elements of the composition with emphasis on line, texture, individual form, and, of course, the spaces in between.

And in the field of architecture, what were your references?

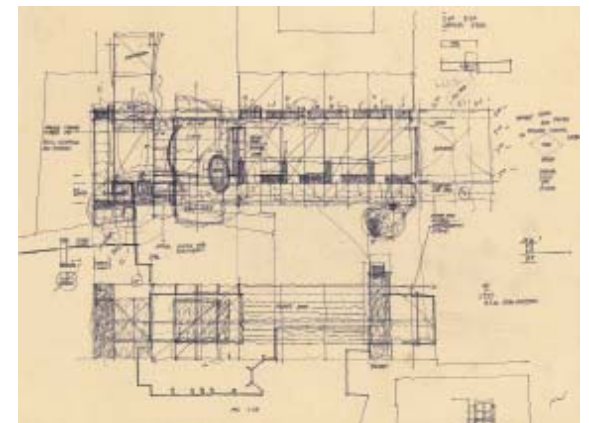
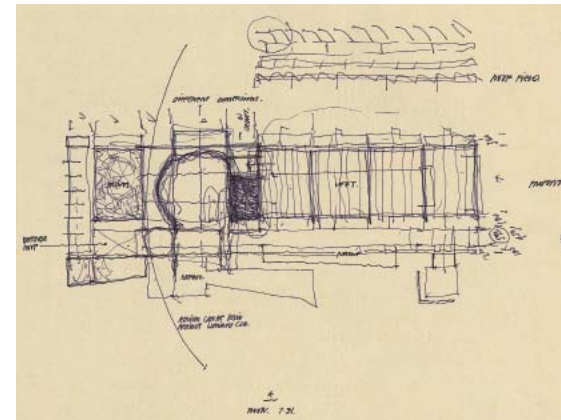
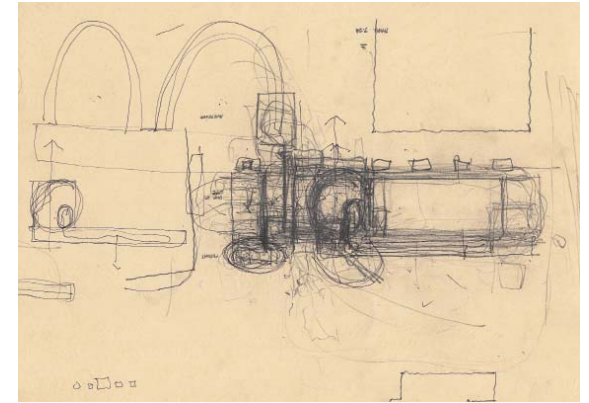
I've been profoundly influenced by the great Italian architects like Borromini. Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza is an example of the importance of geometry and sense of proportion, the play of light and shadow, and the abstraction of materials. I also studied the Baroque churches in Germany and the Gothic architecture of France. Then there are the great modernists, of course: Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Alvar Aalto. They all influenced me. Wright's Guggenheim is one of my favorite museums.

Planned and built at the same time as the Stadthaus in Ulm (1986-93), MACBA has been one of your first projects conceived in a deeply disdained urban area. What unforeseen difficulties have you found?

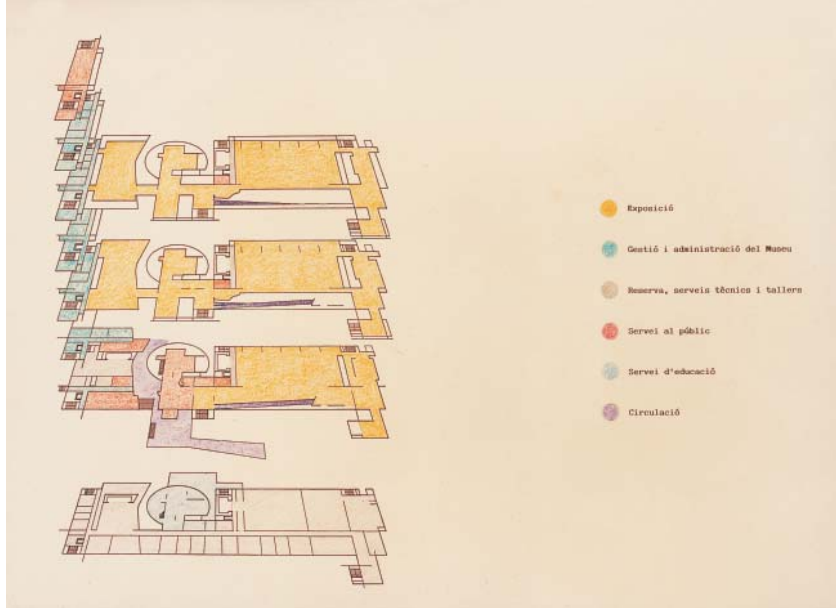
The Raval neighborhood in Barcelona was at its nadir, in desperate need of light, air, open public space, and a heart. The city's broad commitment to the dramatic improvements of its Master Plan for new cultural institutions was the essential catalyst to a very positive and fluid process. There were few, if any, unforeseen difficulties.

Before the Getty Center project in Los Angeles (1984-97) was awarded to you, the Architect Selection Committee accompanied you on a visit to Frankfurt and Atlanta in order for them to see and learn more about the buildings and gain more firsthand experience. What was the process with the MACBA?

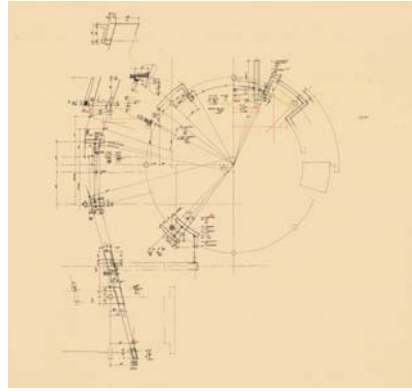
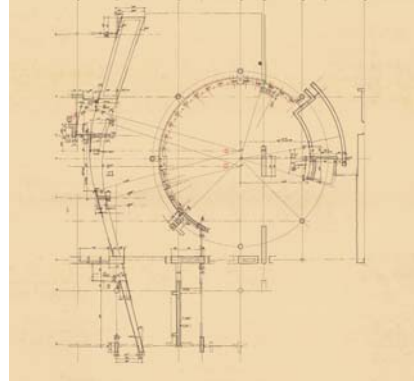
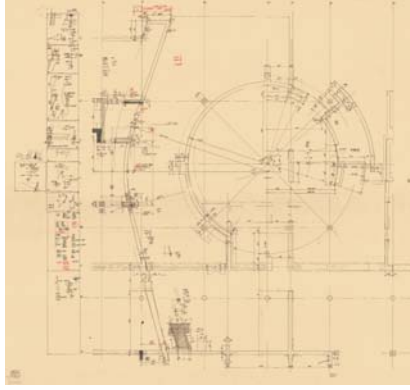
I first met Pasqual Maragall, Mayor of Barcelona at that time, at the World Economic Forum in Davos where we were together on a panel discussion. He asked me what kind of building I might like to design for the city of Barcelona in the context of its planned rebirth for the Olympics. Of course we love museums, and that's what I told him. Some months later we received an invitation to do just that.



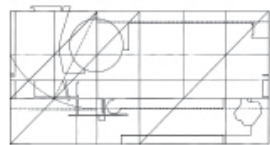
Sketches of the
layout of the building
Richard Meier
& Partners Architects



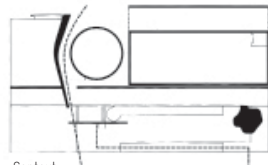
Sketch of the functional
plan by floor
Richard Meier
& Partners Architects
Photo: courtesy of Museu
d'Art Contemporani de
Barcelona (MACBA)



Sketches
Richard Meier
& Partners Architects



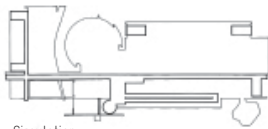
Geometry



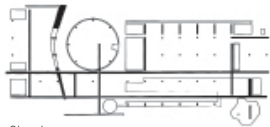
Context



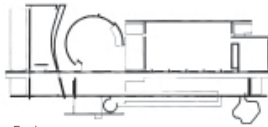
Entry Circulation



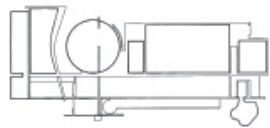
Circulation



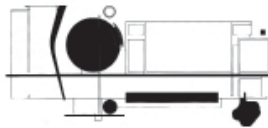
Structure



Enclosure



Program



Objects

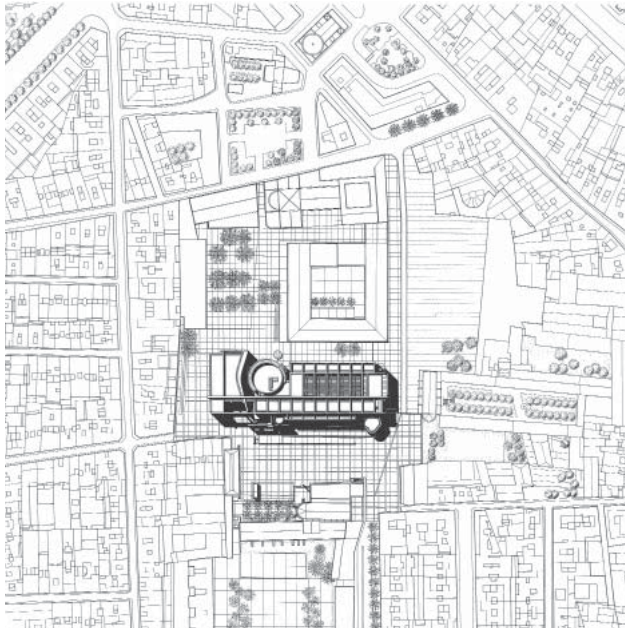
Besides the Trustees' collaboration to define the program, have you received the neighboring Raval community input?

Our invitation to design the MACBA came after a bold Master Plan for the Raval area had already been initiated by the city as part of the mayor's visionary pre-Olympics planning initiatives for urban renewal in the area. The Raval neighborhood had long been a dense underprivileged immigrant neighborhood in a very poor state, presumably with little sense of community among the residents. Our studies evolved in collaboration with a number of local advisers intimately familiar with nature of this new museum as part of the city's social infrastructure as well as with the fabric and history of this neighborhood. Our spiritual guides on this project were Leopoldo Rodés, the instrumental leader and president of the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona Consortium; Josep Acebillo, the city's chief architect; Pep Subirós, a cultural affairs adviser for the city; and our associate architect Fernando Ramos. We were all especially sensitive to the museum's presence at a number of scales – not only by providing an art venue for visitors and tourists to the area, but also by weaving improvements to the quality of life for the neighborhood residents. Still, none of us could have imagined the dramatic positive shift the new plaza and surrounding cultural buildings would have on the life of the neighborhood.

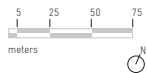
What specific elements were included in the museum's plan in view of improving the quality of life for the neighborhood residents?

We've enhanced the open spaces and the connections between them that are part of the larger network of courtyards in the former convents and monasteries of the neighborhood. The lightness and transparency of the facade on Plaça dels Àngels, and the activities of the Museum beyond, energize the square and building "podium" below. The podium was intended as a prominent social gathering point and a "stage" for large outdoor art.

In view of your intense activity in the field of museum architecture, which elements not previously present in your work should we look for in the project for MACBA?



Site plan



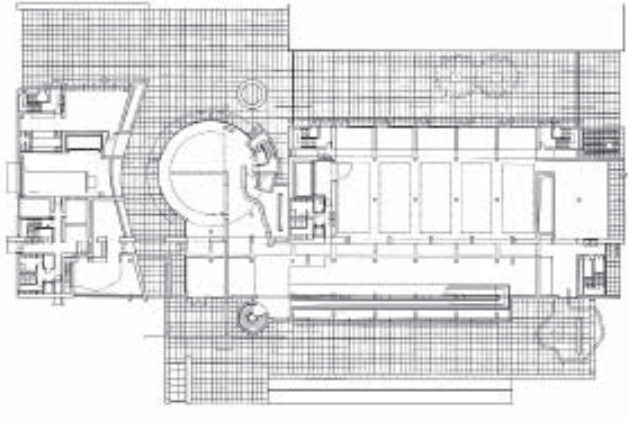
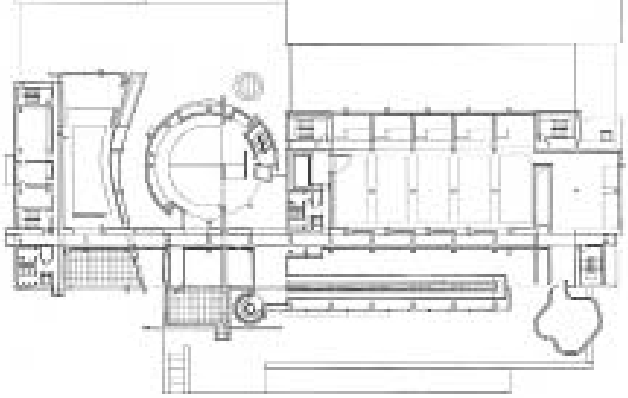
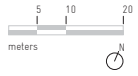
The form, configuration, and light at the MACBA were inspired by the urban richness, and character of the Gothic Quarter, where narrow winding streets cut through a dense mass of heavy stone buildings, and overhanging balconies and sunlight streaming down from the narrow top openings add life to the vertical surfaces. In contrast to the “lightness” and cluster plan of our earlier museum work in Atlanta and Frankfurt, Barcelona’s medieval streets inspired the MACBA’s linear organization, massive walls and vertical spaces, and an almost surgical approach to top lighting. In a Mediterranean environment where light is so abundant, the narrow top-lit streets remind us of Louis Kahn’s talent for editing and manipulating light as a precious resource. At the MACBA we have generally captured only fragments of top light at the edges of vertical spaces in a manner that illuminates individual surfaces, dramatically changing the character of that space over the course of a day, season, or year.

The importance of context has become a commonplace in architectural thinking in recent decades. In this light, what have been the major challenges in constructing in a degraded historical center?

MACBA was the central component in a Master Plan for the area that envisioned a number of new cultural institutions: renovations to the Casa de la Caritat, an expansion of the University of Barcelona directly across Carrer Montalegre, a new German Cultural Institute in the center of the block, and the renovation of the old convent across Plaça dels Àngels into a library. The state of these projects was fluid or incomplete at the time of our work, and the great irony for us as architects working in a historical center was that the context was disintegrating and had to be reimagined. Our challenge was to find balance between the previous order and a new one that, while respecting previous streets, paths, and “edges,” might allow vastly larger, more flexible and public spaces.

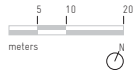
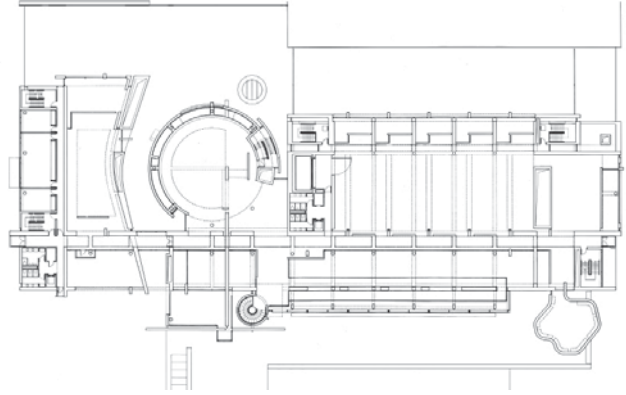
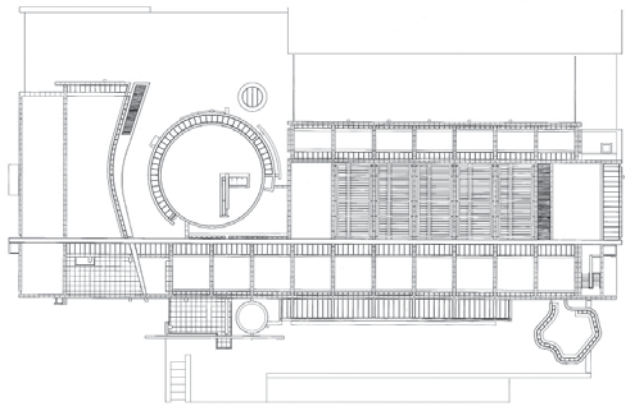
And the museological program: to what extent has it determined the project?

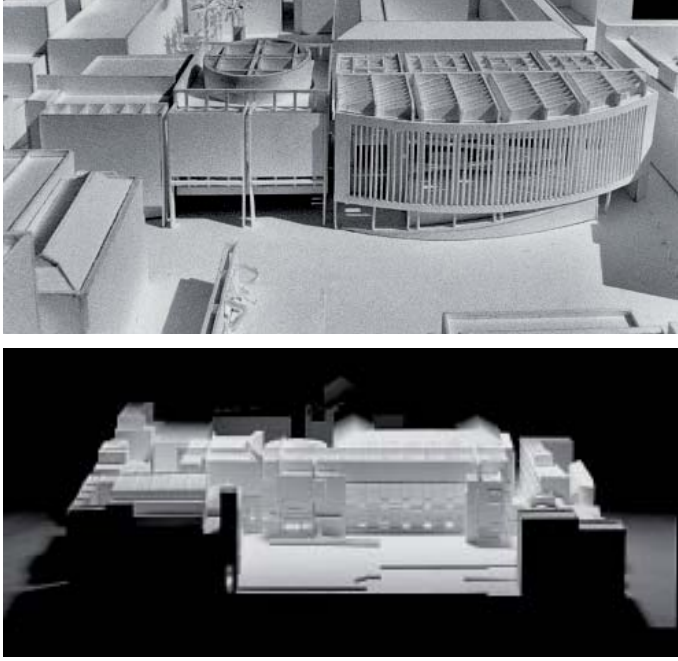
MACBA’s form and configuration were imagined primarily as a flexible response to the scale and light requirements of contemporary art. At the time we began our work



Ground floor and first floor

Second floor and roof level



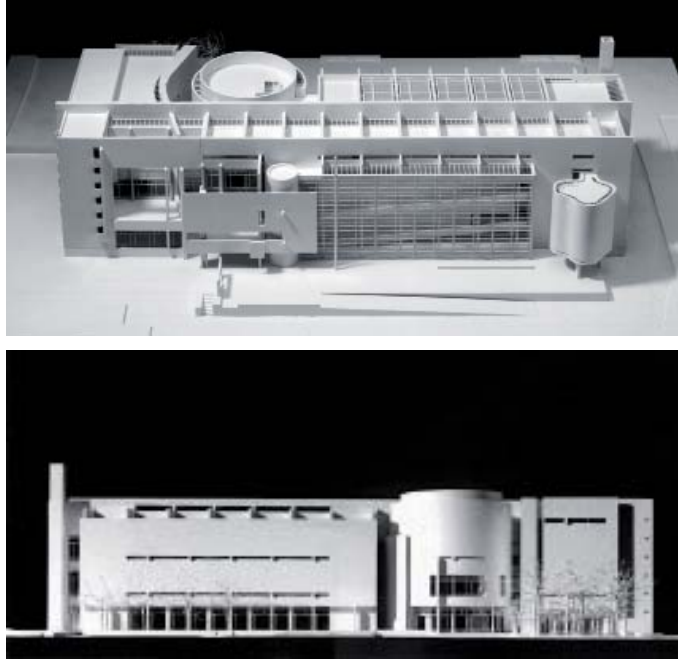


Model of the first and second versions of the building design

Photos: Julio Cumill (top) Martí Gasull and Pau Giralt (bottom)

Front and back view of the definitive version of the building design

Photos: Martí Gasull and Pau Giralt (top) and courtesy of Richard Meier & Partners Architects (bottom)



there was a very small collection, insignificant as a guide toward the design of a museum. Still, we knew contemporary art would include painting, sculpture, video, digital media, prints, photography, and performance art at a variety of scales. Large open loftlike spaces have specifically been designed to accommodate a variety of media and scales in different light conditions: painting generally in the open rectangular galleries to the east; sculpture in the center rotunda; and prints, photography, and digital media in the contoured gallery to the west across the bridge with greater light control.

What particular features of the proposed circulation plan should we focus on?

MACBA is organized along a simple circulation spine from one end of the building to the other, with the variety of galleries as a series of events along the way. It is a strong orientation and social interaction device within the museum, and an important reference point for the building's sense of place in the neighborhood with its views directly into the Plaça dels Àngels. The bold ramps from one level to another off this spine are meant to be as much a part of the Plaça dels Àngels as of the MACBA and to blur the distinction between inside and outside.

A building designed to host a contemporary art collection and exhibition program must take into account both the increasing presence of new technologies and the exhibition's requirements: enclosed spaces, soundproofing, darkness. . . . Do you consider these needs are fully covered?

The wonders of modern technology have made contemporary art increasingly and dramatically unpredictable. At MACBA we created a broad range of spaces in which to view art at various scales and light conditions. The occasional necessity to accommodate "black box" settings is provided for by the flexibility and enormous scale of some of the larger galleries, which have allowed these types of exhibitions to be installed within those spaces.

After the World War II museum architecture took a markedly iconic turn (Wright, Niemeyer . . .) that seems to be accentuated in the latest generation of museums. Where would you situate your own experience?



Views of the building
under construction
Photos: Julio Cunill

We will leave it to history and the public eye to speak to our place among other museums. While our museums may have their own distinctive images, we are fundamentally committed to the viewer's intimate experience with art in a variety of elegant well-proportioned spaces, the physical and spiritual connection of the museum to its place, and the use of daylighting to the extent possible. History may not be so kind to some of the latest generation of more flamboyant museums on that level.

Until very recently, the museum was regarded as a space for reflection and contemplation, the locus of aesthetic experience – with all of the mystical resonances that might be ascribed to it. Now, however, it forms part of a dynamic of consumption that the architecture must obviously take into consideration.

Well-designed gallery space will always be a place for quiet individual reflection and contemplation. A well-designed museum will balance that experience with the importance of being in a public building. It is a social and cultural experience where one interacts not only with the people and events but also with the outside and a particular urban or natural environment. Some acknowledgment of that is equally critical to a visitor's overall experience. In that context a café and book or gift shop is not a dynamic of consumption, but the act of fully participating in the delicate balance between the individual and the collective. The museum can be both literally and metaphysically radiant – as elegant and provocative as the art within.

"The architecture will be axial in its organization, regular in its rhythms, rational and ordered," you have said. Are clarity, order, and balance the keynotes of your design?

Clarity and order, together with natural light and an important connection to a building's site, are the timeless, classical design principles guiding our work. They are not unique to any period or style. These principles are complemented with the exploration of other essential values that are of our time: program, technology, sustainability, and collaboration. Still, with these basic issues in mind, we strive to balance them with imagination, spirit, and an infusion of the cultural context to create work of beauty and elegance. At MACBA we often compare the museum's order and expression to the Catalan spirit *el seny i la rauxa*. If the clarity and order of the building's organization





View of the building's
passage under construction
Photo: Lluís Casals

are the wisdom and common sense of Catalan *seny*, it is balanced by the exuberant expression of elements and transparency in the square facade that are the equivalent of the joy and imagination of the Catalan *rauxa*.

And finally, with the construction of the building and the conditioning of the surrounding area completed, have you had any surprises? Does anything strike you as significantly different from your initial image?

We are surprised by the speed and success of the neighborhood transition that is the result of the city's strategic investment in the Raval. MACBA and the Plaça dels Àngels have become the heart of the neighborhood with a life and energy beyond anything we could have imagined, and it is gratifying to have made such an important contribution to one of the most beloved cities in the world.