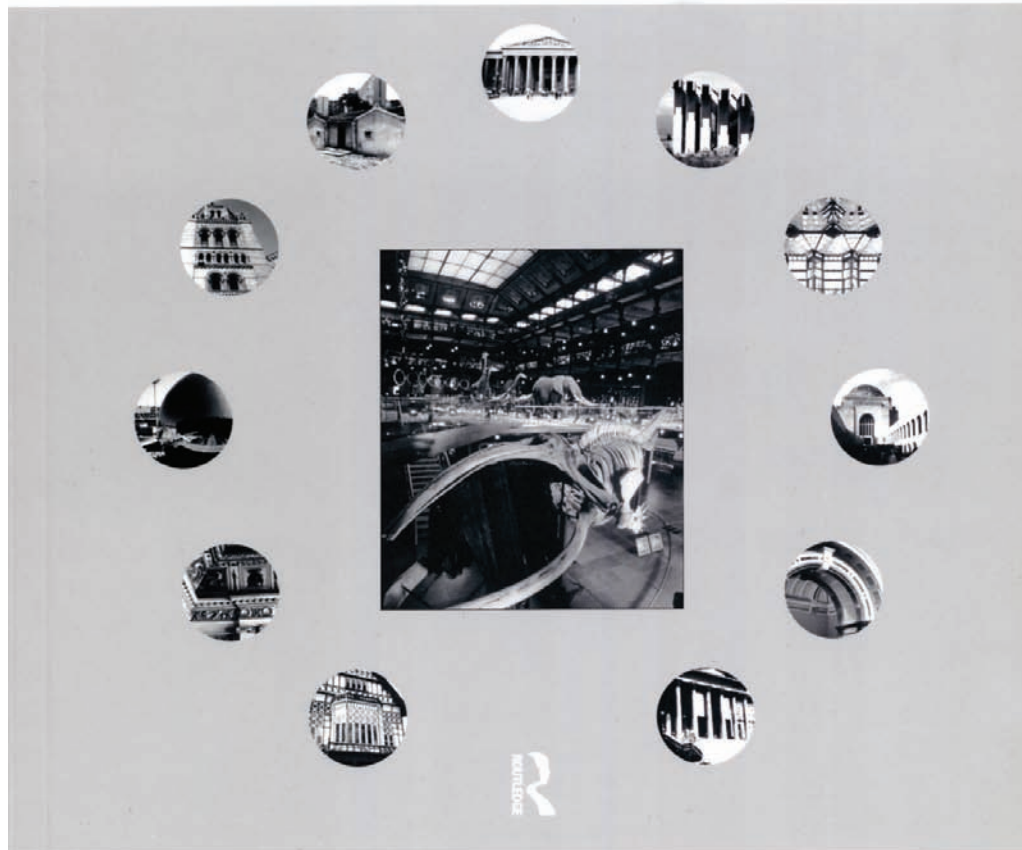




## Reshaping Museum Space

architecture, design, exhibitions



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TOWARDS A NEW MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE:  
NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION

*Lee H. Skolnick, FAIA*

# TOWARDS A NEW MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE: NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION

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## INTRODUCTION

The new century finds museums in yet another life cycle transition. Issues of varying new mediums for high speed access to information, evolving roles and programs of civic institutions within society, and changing styles of teaching and learning – including the long term cognitive effects of new media/information technologies – have had an unexpected impact on the role of museums in their immediate communities and in the world.

Interestingly, they have only become more popular. This is due to a myriad of factors, including an increase in the appeal of social environments for learning, and the growing distrust of other public sources of information. Obviously, this combination of conditions represents a double-edged opportunity for museums: they have the perfect chance to experiment with new ways of interpreting information for an ever-growing audience, and a greater risk of being held accountable if they don't get it right.

The challenge for designers, architects and other museum professionals is to collaborate in leading the way towards new methods of conceiving of, and executing visitor experiences which take into account constantly shifting and progressing modes of thought and understanding. It is also incumbent upon us to find new strategies which serve to render those experiences fresh and invigorating, while realizing that certain aspects of visitor behavior and comfort are in fact more predictable and fixed.

In this paper, I will explore the role that narrative can play in the conceptualization, planning and design of the overall museum experience, including its potential to encompass and integrate site, architecture and exhibition. Over the course of twenty-five years of practice, Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership has used 'narrative' as a means of tapping into the power of an innate human tool used for understanding, as a design generator, as an organizational device, and as a method of embodying the conceptual and thematic within the spatial and experiential.

Through reference to historical and contemporary examples, I will make a strategic and qualitative distinction between the concepts of 'Embodiment' and 'Representation' as they refer to architectural design in general. I will then demonstrate why an understanding of these points, their particular significance to the field of museum design, and their relationship to the use of an expanded definition of narrative, constitute a promising and fertile area for creative exploration and inquiry. Finally, I will discuss how this potent mix, inherently inclusive of the many voices (curator, designer, educator, etc.) which can contribute to the ultimate success of the visitor experience, offers a new dimension in the creation of meaning.

Before going forward, permit me to start with an apology (something architects rarely do) inside a deconstruction (something architects did for a short time, but have largely stopped doing). All of this relates to the title of my paper: *"Towards a New Museum: Architecture, Narrative and Representation."* I must beg forgiveness for a bit of petty larceny to two

writers who came before me, and whose titles I have borrowed and bastardized.

In 1923, the Swiss-born architect who called himself Le Corbusier published a revolutionary manifesto on architecture, technology, philosophy and society. He called it "*Vers Une Architecture*," or "*Towards an Architecture*." For some reason, when it was translated into English, it morphed into the perhaps more apt "*Towards a New Architecture*"<sup>1</sup> when published in the U.S. In it, Le Corbusier prophesied on architecture which took as its inspiration the no-nonsense, yet sublimely beautiful formal solutions to functional problems which advances in technology and mass production would make possible. He equated democracy with equal access to stripped-down "machines for living," and envisioned "radiant cities" which would promote physical, mental, and spiritual health amidst communities of serene sameness.

In 1998, the American connoisseur and architectural writer Victoria Newhouse published "*Towards a New Museum*."<sup>2</sup> Far from offering a bold manifesto, Ms. Newhouse proposed to "observe and assess what others have done," and "to report on the direction museum architecture is taking." She further limited her brief by taking as the object of her analysis the art museum only.

In a review of Ms. Newhouse's book which I wrote for "*Curator*" magazine,<sup>3</sup> I noted that "the book on the future of architecture and museums is still being written." While that statement is perhaps more true than ever, and while I do not propose to offer that book up now, I would like to focus in on a particular opportunity for vivid communication which museum design affords. I would call your attention back to my introduction, where I wrote that in the face of constant and rapid change, and the growing need for new approaches to the crafting of experiences, we must remember that "certain aspects of visitor behavior and comfort are in fact more predictable and fixed." Here, one must make a connection back to something which is a very basic human instinct as well as a strategy and structure common to many types of communication and learning: **narrative**. And while there seems to be an undoubted trend these days to ascribe narrative significance to everything from philosophy to medicine, I would submit that narrative has had, and continues to have, a particularly significant place in the making and experiencing of both architecture and museums.

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<sup>1</sup> *Towards a New Architecture*, Le Corbusier, Dover Publications, 2/1986

<sup>2</sup> *Towards a New Museum*, Victoria Newhouse, Monacelli Press, 5/98

<sup>3</sup> *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Reviewed by Lee H. Skolnick, Vol 42, Number 1, 1/99

## NARRATIVE

To substantiate the foundational role of narrative in creating human culture, let us look at its roots in storytelling, and cite the work of Psychologist Jerome Bruner (e.g., his book, *“Acts of Meaning”*<sup>4</sup>) by way of a wonderful paper on this subject by museum specialist Leslie Bedford. Bruner observed that human beings are natural storytellers, that they make sense of the world and themselves through narrative (in other words: learn); and that, as such, storytelling is a primary instrument for making meaning. Leslie Bedford goes on to put a cap on it by saying that “storytelling is an ideal strategy for realizing the constructivist museum, an environment where visitors of all ages and backgrounds are encouraged to create their own meaning and find that place, the intersection between the familiar and the unknown where genuine learning occurs.”<sup>5</sup> Or, as my architectural colleague, Arthur Rosenblatt, founding Director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Washington, D.C. offered in his forward to a recent book on museums: “architecture can be both evocative and moving in the development of a ‘storytelling museum.’”<sup>6</sup>

So, in explanation of why I chose to reference and plunder the titles of the previously cited authors, Le Corbusier and Newhouse, let me propose that I intend a mild manifesto, supported by observation and assessment of what some others have done. At the very least, I hope to provide some food for thought to those whose work is devoted to imagining and moving us “Towards a New Museum.”

## NARRATIVE IS GOOD. REPRESENTATION IS NOT AS GOOD. EMBODIMENT IS IDEAL.

This might have been a more appropriate clarifier for this paper. Actually, I left ‘Embodiment’ out of my original title because I was afraid that it might already be too obscure and I didn’t want to confuse people any more than necessary. Nonetheless, embodiment is, from my point of view, the highest and ultimate goal. For while architecture certainly deals in the fourth dimension - time - it is not film or music (frozen or otherwise) or writing; it exists all at once, while unfolding and revealing itself in time. So, with apologies to ‘Narrative,’ I like ‘Embodiment.’

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<sup>4</sup> *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner, Harvard University Press, 7/92

<sup>5</sup> “*Storytelling: The Realwork of Museums*” Leslie Bedford

<sup>6</sup> *Museum Architecture*, Henderson, Justin, [forward by Arthur Rosenblatt] Rockport, 1998

## REPRESENTATION

Well, then, what's wrong with 'Representation'? In truth, it's certainly not terrible. Some very nice buildings use metaphor and symbol to great poetic effect. This is especially true in recent times, when formal architectural vocabulary has been freed from the formulaic constraints of strict stylistic convention, and as technological advances in both design tools and construction methods have allowed for greater freedom in imagining buildings and in building them (although in many cases the ways people actually use buildings may not have undergone the same revolutionary changes). I think the operative point for us is that often these exuberant expressions bear very little relation to the ostensible or real purpose of the building, and that they sometimes actually impede rather than enhance their natural and proper function.

In Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, the light, curvilinear forms of walls and roofs have been said to evoke sailing ships on the water, and are themselves sculpturally expressive. Further, they refer to Bilbao's geographical position and historical role as a port city. This does not necessarily qualify them, or the interior spaces they enclose, as the most beneficial place to display art. Similarly, Santiago Calatrava's boldly expressive new Milwaukee Art Museum with its birdlike form and retractable roof, is a blockbuster in its own right, but neither particularly expressive of nor supportive to the artwork stored inside. And while Renzo Piano's New Metropolis Museum in Amsterdam may be photographed strategically in juxtaposition with the ships' prows from which it takes its form, it is difficult to understand what relationship this is intended to have with the science activities which are at the heart of the museum's program and *raison d'être*. Before leaving this aspect of 'Representation', we might compare these buildings to Jorn Utzon's iconic Sydney Opera House, whose forms manage to refer to both the sails of the harbor and to the theme of music, while having the added advantages of clearly delineating the concert halls and offering them notably euphonic acoustics.

Of course, sometimes the 'Representation' is quite literal. Throughout history, there have been buildings and structures which were, if not actually figurative, at least referred in their visual message to nothing so strongly as the function and/or subject for which they were created. And if they didn't always work perfectly as integrated experiences or as beautiful objects, they nevertheless gave people a pretty good idea of what they were for. The Long Island Duck, of "Complexity and Contradiction" (Robert Venturi) fame, wears its function and subject on its sleeve (or wing). You bought ducks there. The forms of Frank Gehry's Experience Music Project in Seattle are said to have been developed by smashing up electric guitars and then rearranging them until a optimal composition was found. (It is widely held that the usually masterful Gehry may have hit a 'clinker' on this one. Herbert Muschamp, architecture critic for the New York Times, recently likened it to "something that crawled out of the sea, rolled over and died"). Much of the music venerated at EMP was played on the guitar, mostly the electric guitar. And groups from "The Who" to the "Jimi

Hendrix Experience” enjoyed smashing them. Unfortunately, the interior of the building gains little other than spatial bombast for all the trouble. It might get at the fracturing rebelliousness of rock music, but it doesn’t capture any of its other qualities. On the other hand, in that regard it beats I.M. Pei’s, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, by miles and miles. Some can see the supposedly intentional reference to a record player there, but I’m not that creative. Further, it feels like nothing so much as Pei’s East Wing addition to the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and manages to freeze any of the heat of Rock and Roll, while sticking the exhibits in the basement and the mausoleum-like Hall of Fame way up in its darkened peak. Dominique Perrault’s infamous Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris (the one that baked the books) is defined by the four glass towers at its corners (wherein books are stored behind large sheets of glass), each in the shape of an open book. Books within books, get it?

And ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous (you decide which is which), there are Claude Ledoux’s project for a Cenotaph for Newton, whose neo-Utopian/neo-Platonic design refers to the planets and/or the cosmos/universe; James Stewart Polshek’s Rose Center for Earth and Space in New York, which although a naturally literal and cool visual reference is not known to be a great place to design or experience exhibits on the subject; and, of course, Lucy (the Elephant), standing proudly near the Jersey. One could go on.

There have been more ingeniously sophisticated examples of ‘Representation’ as well. Here, a modern sensibility has filtered and translated historical, cultural, or other subject matter information into an essentially contemporary design vocabulary. Still, in these buildings the references frequently appear to be somewhat applied, and as such have less influence on the depth and specificity of the experience in and around them. Two come to mind immediately. Jean Nouvel’s Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, one of whose glass facades are fitted with a pattern of Islamic-inspired mechanical irises that open and close based on sensors which measure the sunlight hitting them. This late-twentieth century tour de force sends a message about Islam’s traditional art, its marriage with a heritage of mathematics and science, and also serves as a forward looking comment regarding the Islamic world’s relevance and vibrancy in an age of technology. It has the added advantage of modulating the light entering spaces devoted to work and study. James Ingo Freed’s U.S. Holocaust Memorial and Museum, in Washington, DC, adapts a visual language referring to Hitler’s World War II death camps for some of its interior and exterior forms and details (although far too slickly and exquisitely for my taste), and in an ironic twist for a building in our nation’s capital, collides and juxtaposes it with an overtly hulking and conventional institutional building. Its almost covert insertion into its federal context provides a subtle but subversive commentary on the dangers of government-sanctioned atrocities. In this building, one must note that the staggering power of the total visitor experience is the result of a clear desire on the part of both the architect and the exhibit designer to imbue their separate parts with meaning and association. And, although the integration between architecture and exhibits could be both more intentional and more seamless, there is an undeniable emotional impact which owes to the largely successful attempt to let design help tell the story.

## EMBODIMENT

Well, we're getting closer and closer to our goal, so why not just cross the threshold? The problem with many of the very good – in some cases great – buildings which I have cited thus far is simply that, in general terms, they just don't allow their story - their narrative - enough of a role in defining the experiences they offer. They miss the full opportunity to infuse their core mission, themes and concepts into all aspects of their sites, buildings and exhibits, thereby instilling a sense of specificity, an organic rightness unique to their situations. In other words, they don't venture past 'representing' these ideas to the more fertile ground of 'embodying' them.

When Louis Sullivan told the world that form should follow function he was interpreted by different people in different ways. On the most mundane level, the phrase is understood to mean that a building should do no more nor less than be designed to facilitate its most pragmatic purpose. Storage facilities need big, open spaces. Prisons need lots of cells (perhaps), good lines of sight for security, and should be hard to get out of. Offices benefit from easy access to light and air, and the provision of certain types of workspace and communication. It is easy to be reminded of Le Corbusier's "machines for living." However, Sullivan's declaration and edict is widely interpreted in architectural and academic circles as proposing something which is both more philosophical and more creatively challenging. It is understood to demand that the design of a building stem from an initial set of ideas which inform, to the greatest degree – and extent – possible, the creative problem solving which is embodied in the myriad of decisions regarding how it looks, functions and is made. The idea is that by being clear regarding one's intent, and by carefully integrating each part of the building through adherence to rules and referents which support that intent, a unique harmony – that "organic rightness" which I mentioned earlier – can be achieved. And it strongly suggests, I believe, that those guiding concepts be derived from the project's purpose, in a range of both general and specific terms.

Thus, a church, while designed to comfortably seat its congregation, must also speak to themes of inspiration, and do so in ways which are evidenced in its materials, acoustics and ventilation no less than in its space, light and 'decoration.' (I use this term guardedly, for while Sullivan and his contemporaries felt comfortable in ascribing organic significance to decoration and ornamentation, subsequent history has gone through a sequence of banning it as impure and perverse, re-introducing it as symbolic pastiche and, more recently – as seen in some of the previously cited examples – making it the guiding principle or image of the overall design A big duck, a big bird, smashed guitars, boats of all sorts.)

A hospital, in order to fulfill its mission of healing and wellness, must augment its technical specificity with the provision – at every level of the design and decision-making process – of those elements which promote physical, mental and spiritual health. These should manifest themselves in the overall look and feel, in the treatment of the site, in the approach and entry, in the spaces and modes of reception and admittance, and so on. But it should also



influence the construction materials and finishes, the treatment of light and air, the acoustics, the sense of privacy and the access to community.

The example of a hospital, or health center, is perhaps one of the most programmatically complex which one can tackle. So let's look at some very simple ones to illustrate the notion of successful 'Embodiment.' The fact that they are notable examples of modern architecture frequently cited by historians should not, for our purposes, bestow upon them undue imprimatur or censure. The Penguin Pool at the London Zoo (1933), designed by Ove Arup and others, is a perfect poster child for 'Embodiment'. It is meant to enhance the viewing of penguins by offering them a place to congregate, to walk down a ramp, and to jump in the water. It affords the viewing public multiple unobstructed views of the proceedings and does so in a simple, elegant and straightforward manner. It doesn't refer to anything else. Some may say that it doesn't refer in a strongly literal enough way to the penguins' natural habitat, but that is a matter of taste.

Alvar Aalto's Sawmill in Vancas, Finland of 1945 is another good case in point. It celebrates its purpose and the processes it houses, enhancing one's appreciation of them, while facilitating its function. It doesn't look like logs (!). However, through its gracefully sculptural design, it artfully elevates this relatively mundane process by clarifying and highlighting it, thereby increasing understanding.

To begin to come back around to our own subject of museums, it is fruitful to look at Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (2001). Widely revered, its jagged, slashing design is unquestionably successful at evoking the wrenching, irrational and disorienting chaos of the Holocaust on the most visceral and experiential level. Its highly architecturally specific spaces, are eloquently interpretive of the subject at hand rather than something completely unrelated.

## **TOWARDS EMBODIMENT**

For those of us who labor and dwell in the world of museums, who believe in their potential and are committed to making them better, the challenge is to take up the tools – of embodiment, of narrative, of the broadest interpretation of function – and to exploit their still untapped capabilities in order to enrich the museum experience for the broadest range of visitors.

At Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership, we have spent twenty-five years pursuing this challenge. Through projects ranging from master planning and site design, through the architectural design of new buildings, renovations and additions, to exhibition design, graphics and educational programming we have explored new ways of creating seamlessly integrated experiences which embody the mission, goals and objectives of each institution, combining an understanding of their specific target audiences with the unique stories these organizations seek to tell.



The brief project descriptions which follow are not meant to be held as exemplars of the perfectly successful achievement of the goals which I have espoused. In fact, one might easily and rightly question whether that ideal has yet been attained anywhere. Rather, the best reason for citing examples of our own work is simply that I am intimately familiar with what our objectives were, and the means we undertook to meet them. These processes and methods are not meant to be prescriptive. If they are in some way instructive and useful, we will have contributed something to the cause.

A key indication of our commitment to the values of interpretation and audience is the fact that I believe we were the first design firm – certainly the first architecture firm – to have a full time museum services division, led and staffed by trained museum educators, as an integral part of our design team. One impact of this is that we are uniquely equipped to engage the interest, expertise and perspectives of the full range of players necessary to ensure a project's success: the museum board and administration, the curators and subject area specialists, the educators and programming personnel, the registrars and conservators, and the facilities and maintenance staff. And, most importantly, the visitor.

There are a few fundamental aspects to our approach to any project. First, we try and put ourselves in the position of the potential anticipated participant: What do they know about this subject? How interested might they be? We try to learn as much as we can both about them and about the subject itself in order to find connections between the two. This involves research, close collaboration with curators and content experts, educators and interpreters, as well as the implementation of any range of interviews, focus groups, and other forms of front-end evaluation. Secondly, we look at all the interpretive opportunities which the situation might offer – from its location within a larger architectural or geographic context, to the potential for narrative expression in the building design, and finally to the marriage of site, building and exhibitions into a cohesive visitor experience. These explorations eventually lead us to the development of a highly particularized, yet consistent visual and communicative vocabulary, including forms, space, materials, details, graphics and media. Finally, through various evaluative means, we test our assumptions and refine them along the way in order to ensure that the story we are telling is as vivid, as compelling, and as understandable as we can make it. Throughout the process, we continually challenge ourselves, and our collaborators, to un-earth, identify, and exploit any aspect and/or component of the project which has narrative potential which can contribute to the complete embodiment of the content. In each of the projects described, I will note something about it which attempts to get at the notions of narrative or embodiment to which I have been referring. Where appropriate, I will also highlight some of the methodological approaches used to address that goal.

The Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee (Figure 9.1) was conceived to be a place where children and families are invited to become actively involved in a creative exploration that integrates the arts and sciences; a place that da Vinci would have loved.



Figure 9.1 The Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee.  
Photograph © Peter Aaron/Esto.



Figure 9.2 The interior of the The Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Photograph © Peter Aaron/Esto.



Figure 9.3 The Marine Park Environmental Center in Brooklyn, New York.  
Photograph Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership.

The Museum was placed within Chattanooga's downtown riverfront to enhance its re-development as a center of cultural and recreational activity. The building is only part of a procession which links the city and the inner workings of the Museum's internal exhibition programming. Along the way, from discovering the building's tower on the skyline, to the participatory pathway that leads to the entry, to encountering the interactive water sculpture from first outside and then inside (Figure 9.2), the visitor is drawn deeper and deeper into the mission and program of CDM, finally realizing that it is they who are the creators and discoverers who make the entire Museum come alive.

For the Marine Park Environmental Center in Brooklyn, New York (Figure 9.3) situated in a sensitive wetlands area at the junction of land and water, the processional pathway led to a series of sequential revelations and an ultimate goal. As visitors strolled through a public park, the walkway transformed imperceptibly into a bridge focusing attention on the transition from land to water. At the same time, the ground plane tilted up and the path continued, inviting visitors into the space between land and water, the glass-enclosed exhibit and workshop spaces under the planted roof. From here, breathtaking panoramic views of the wetlands and the bay beyond beckoned visitors back onto the path, now leading out of the building to ramps and floating docks from which to board the boats which would take them to engage in further exploration out in the unspoiled nature.

At the Sony Wonder Technology Lab in New York City, the story was the breakthroughs in media and technology which have permitted great advances in the ability to create, alter and share content. This paramount message, combined with the evolution from analog to digital mediums and the freeing of presentation from the confines of the traditional screen, led us to create an environment where

architecture and media merge, and visitors hold the power to transform their surroundings through unleashing their own imaginations.

Congregation B'nai Yisrael in Armonk, New York is not a museum, but it offers a lesson on how a strong narrative concept can inform the design of a building. In this case, the key ideas are the Jewish religion's focus on the quality of how one lives one's life on earth, the cycles and journey embodied in that life, reverence for God's creation, and the primacy of community, study and observance. Congregants and visitors come upon a garden wall which, though level on top, appears to grow taller as the land slopes down to the building's entry. After passing through the transition space of a small, wooden vestibule, one finds oneself under the shelter of an ethereal tent-like curved canopy. After advancing through the lobby, one emerges into the Sanctuary and an unobstructed view of the Torah Ark set into a large, glass façade: the permanency of the Laws amidst the every-changing landscape. The cycle is completed from nature, through study, gathering, observance and communion, back to nature.

When invited to compete to design a headquarters and visitor center for the Mohonk Preserve, New York State's largest private, non-profit land preserve, one thing was clear: they really didn't want a building. Through retreats and interviews with the Board and staff, we came to realize the obvious. What was called for was not a destination, but a gateway. Thus was born the Trapps Gateway Center, an experience and a building of and for the land. Everything about the siting, physical approach, land development, architectural design, and exterior and interior interpretation tells a story about the land. Themes of geology, geography, biology, ecology, cultural history and responsible land stewardship combine through careful attention to the individual experiential and physical components and the messages they send.

The building is almost hidden upon approach; it disappears into the landscape and is made from the site's native stone and the few trees felled to create its footprint. When it finally emerges, it appears as a modest gateway, concealing its eleven thousand square feet of floor space by being cut into the slope of a land ridge. It bespeaks environmental awareness through the incorporation of local and re-cycled materials and derives most of its climate control through a geo-thermal heating and cooling system. The building and site further cooperate in telling their stories by sending the visitor, first through views and then through circulation, back out to the interpretive trails and the land, which are the true focus and destination.

To honor and further the humanitarian achievements of "The Greatest," the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky (Figure 9.4) had to embody the strength, power, lightness, speed and grace that Ali brought to 'the ring' and to the field of human empowerment, respect and understanding. The form of the Center, referring to Ali's famous dictate to "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" juxtaposes a solid masonry base, firmly rooted to the ground, with a light and aerodynamic winged roof canopy. The narrative is further enhanced



Figure 9.4 The Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky. Photograph Lee H. Skolnick Architecture + Design Partnership/Beyer Belle Architects and Planners.

by the façade's use of digitized photographic images of 'the most recognized face on earth' to impart its distinctive identity. The man whose ascendancy paralleled the proliferation of mass media within our culture will forever be remembered through the medium that helped to immortalize him. On a substantive experiential level, the story of Ali's evolution as a professional, as a world ambassador and as a man, is traced through a spatial organization that uses the timeline of his life as an armature. Along it are hung both the key moments in his development and the broader themes which they represent, and which tie his experiences to the lives of each visitor.

In ascending along with Ali, we are all encouraged to be the greatest we can be.

### ONWARDS, TOWARDS. . . .

The preceding illustrations represent but a few ways that 'Embodiment' might be pursued in the realm of museum design. The hope lies in the possibilities to be mined from the raw materials of the human tendency to understand the world through the stories it can tell, and the potential that design holds to translate those tales into real-time, spatial experiences. If architects, designers and museum professionals rally together towards these ideals, museums may continue to become more engaging, more meaningful, and ever more well-attended cultural resources.

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