

## BEYOND THE PROGRAM: THE DEEPER LEVELS OF PREPARING A PROGRAM FOR AN ARCHITECTURAL COMPETITION, AS REFLECTED IN THE COMPETITION FOR PLANNING A NEW BUILDING FOR THE TEL AVIV MUSEUM OF ART

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An architectural program is generally conceived as a technical document that defines spaces and details the functional requirements of each space in the project. This conception is valid when there is direct and ongoing communication between the sponsor, who has overall responsibility for the details of the program, and the planner, who is entrusted with translating it into an architectural project. When the program is used for an architectural competition, and especially for an anonymous competition in which it constitutes the sole means of communication between the sponsor and the planner, its role changes. The program still has to detail the functional requirements for the various kinds of spaces, as well as their projected capacity and desired physical-perceptual atmosphere, but this detailing needs to be supplemented by another section, which I will call the sponsor's "credo". The "credo" section of the program has a variety of tasks: firstly, to introduce the sponsor to the planner, by means of historical and idea background, in order to create a shared basis of knowledge; secondly, to detail the sponsor's "vision" for the building to be planned.

Defining the "vision" behind a new building is a very delicate and complex task, which entails, *inter alia*, ideologically based aspects, which find expression in the degree of freedom to be given the planner in his interpretation of the "vision", and theoretical aspects, which chart the new building on the background of the contemporary discourse. These aspects become only more acute when the building in question is an important one or is perceived as important by the sponsor. This essay will discuss approaches to the preparing of an architectural program, and will point out their various implications – both positive and negative – for all aspects of the

planning of the new building. As a test case, the essay will survey dilemmas and solutions that arose in the process of preparing the program for the new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and their expression in the program itself and in several of the projects submitted for the competition.

The etymological meaning of the word "program"<sup>1</sup> hints at an envisaging that aims to provide a solution for a need. Determining the need is, on the face of it, the joint work of the sponsor and his representative, the author of the program, who interprets the sponsor's guidelines into a language that will be understood by the architect. Defining the needs is a complex matter when the building in question is a public one, such as a museum. When this is the case, the question arises whether the relation between the museum (as a body open to the public) and its consumers also has to be expressed in the determining of the architectural program, or, in other words – whether it is right, and how, to involve the public of consumers in determining the need. The answer to this question will become integrated with the answer to a more comprehensive question that arises in work on any architectural program: how will the program characterize the new building, and who will characterize the program itself. This question of course also arose in the course of preparing the program for the planning of the new wing. Involving the "consumer", *i.e.*, the visitor to the museum, seemed essential for the characterization, especially in light of the understanding that with the consolidation of the Information Technology Revolution, the concept of the museum is taking on new meanings.

In the present competition this question was answered by inviting representatives of the public (politicians, business people, theater

people, intellectuals) to take part in an open discussion on the character of the program in light of the needs and the vision for the new building. The representatives of the public were asked to present their vision of the museum of the future in general, and of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in particular. Analysis of the representatives' remarks produced one clear conclusion: the major discussion of the program would revolve around the conflict between the conception of the museum as a building whose main purpose is to attract visitors and the conception of it as an introverted "shrine" housing the works that are kept inside it.

### A Need or a Solution

A program is supposed to define needs more than to propose solutions, and therefore to raise questions more than to propose answers. The planner of the building will have to relate to these questions in the course of his planning. The proposed project constitutes an answer, both architectural and ideational, to the questions raised by the program, and the more numerous its questions, the more complex and profound must the answer be; and the more the questions entail various aspects and diverse points of departure (a point of departure in the sense of who raises the question: the viewing public, the Director of the museum, an organizational advisor), the more precise will the answer be as a response to the needs, and perhaps even the more interesting in terms of the architectural discourse that will be woven between the question and the answer. The questions raised by the program relate to two kinds of needs: measurable needs and non-measurable needs. Measurable needs, *i.e.*, physical data that characterize spaces, comprise most of the programs known to us, while non-

measurable needs involve a spatial conception and the sensations evoked or desired. These needs have a perhaps more central place in all that concerns posing the questions that the planner is required to reply to.

### **The Program as Initiator of an Architectural Discourse**

Just as a city is a historical and cultural expression of the spirit of its inhabitants, a new public building is supposed to constitute an interpretation of the spirit of the period in which it was built. This interpretation is subject to the test of time, but also to the test of its immediate impact on the architectural discourse. The architectural discourse that develops around the initiative to erect a new building and after its construction is the program's "litmus paper". A project that does not stimulate an architectural discussion has probably refrained from making critical determinations as a response to questions that arise from the "vision" section of the program. The Pompidou Center in Paris aroused trenchant public argument, which revolved around the concept of the museum and around the building's relation to its vicinity – as a response to the extreme character of the architectural solution and to the innovative interpretation it gave to the relation between the building and its systems. This solution could not have been possible were it not for the program's "vision", which, *inter alia*, saw the building as a means of demonstrating France's technological greatness in Pompidou's time. The questions raised by the program thus have a dual role: a didactic one – to present the building from the sponsor's point of view; and, secondly, to create a basis for critical responses.

The architectural discourse aroused by the Tel Aviv Museum of Art competition focused on two aspects: a judiciary one – the question

of copyright in the case of an extension of the existing building – and I will not elaborate on this in the present essay – and a critical one (around the works submitted for the competition and the prizewinning works). It is surprising that the architectural and public discussion of the prizewinning works, which were received with warmth and even with praise by the public of architects and by the media, did not rise above informational issues. The solution proposed by the winning project, for example, connects with the global discourse about the new language of architectural forms produced by the use of the computer as a planning instrument. It might have been expected to arouse a fascinating discussion about the significance of the use of this new language in the Israeli context, as happened not long ago with the question of the architectural contribution of the plan to erect a new entrance building for The Israel Museum in Jerusalem. There was room to hope for comparisons among the prizewinning proposals, which interpret the program in different ways and present different critical approaches to the character of a new building in a museum. It is not clear whether the lack of architectural discussion stems from a detachment or non-involvement of Israeli architects in the global discourse; it may be that the interpretation of the program embodied in the projects actually matches these architects' expectations and does not appear innovative to them.

### **From an Idea Vision to a Design Vision**

An idea vision of a building, which is detailed in the program, is required in order to map the building as a unit in the urban space, and to examine its relation to the individual person and the public. In its guidelines it is supposed to arouse an architectural discussion around

the message that the sponsor seeks to convey by means of the building. Polar ideas, such as power and authority versus openness and transparency, progress versus conservatism and even nihilism, are part of a broad repertoire of messages that the author of the vision has to orchestrate. Like any other communicational message, the idea vision has to be clear. If it is defined in a hesitant and indecisive manner (beyond the risk of presenting a faulty or inappropriate vision), this will result in the planners' inability to decide on a stand on what is required by the program, and may engender hesitant projects that lack a critical architectural statement.

A program that has no vision or whose "vision" is composed of fragments of ideas that do not cohere into a whole entails a great risk. In such a situation the sponsor will tend to adhere to the familiar, the common, the banal. The sponsoring institution's greatness sometimes manifests itself in the understanding that it does not have an adequately developed idea to constitute a "vision" for a new building. In such cases it is necessary to open the program itself to interpretative suggestions, in a quest for a comprehensive solution that also contains a critical position on the question of the "vision for the building".

Another risk entailed in defining an idea vision is the tendency to slide into design definitions while transforming the idea vision into a design vision. In this situation the program supplies a solution instead of posing problems, and reveals itself as a one-dimensional document that defines functional needs and the way to solve them. Nonetheless: is it right to leave the solution entirely in the planner's hands? Is it not proper to define a formal direction, especially when it comes

to functions that are of supreme importance for the building's functioning? The answer to these questions, in my opinion, depends on the kind of building and on the character of the competition. When the issue is an open competition and a public building such as a museum, the planners should be given complete freedom to find and to formulate the solution, in order to obtain a large number of diverse proposals and to use the competition as a tool for developing the program. In cases of a more limited competition, one based from the outset on a preliminary filtering of the participants and their design inclinations, there is room for more detailing of the form/design connection, as a presentation of a position that is open to interpretation.

The direction that was chosen in the case of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art's competition foresaw the difficulties to be expected in contending with the complexity of the measurable needs, and in taking into account the size and the geometry of the site. The "vision" for the Museum in its expanded format was based, *inter alia*, on the conclusions of an internal workshop that the Museum itself held on this subject. The "vision" for the program was presented in a clear and concise manner, which included the declaration by the Museum's Director, Prof. Mordechai Omer, that "the architectural planning has to be appropriate to the needs involved in exhibiting art works in a diversity of modes of expression: painting, sculpture, photography, video art, architecture, etc. Likewise, the building is meant to be a symbol in its role as an abode of contemporary modern art, both Israeli and international"; as well as a paragraph dealing with the design of the Museum: "the architectural language of the building will be contemporary, but will have

to conduct a dialogue with the architecture existing around it. What is desired is a building possessing architectural values that will not overshadow or dominate the art works to be exhibited inside it. At the same time, we must guard against a situation in which the shell will not attest to its contents and will be nullified by the architectural density in its surroundings".

The presentation of the program's "vision" was seen as an initial step only, which sought to use the competition and the expected response to it as a programmatic tool for examining the initial premises and for extending and developing them before the second stage. The complexity of the measurable needs necessitated comprehensive programmatic reference to the functional requirements – but this was juxtaposed with an idea direction that was clear but also flexible enough to make possible a critical response that would not go beyond the program's definitions and have to be disqualified.

In this context of the character of the response to the program, three types may be distinguished among the projects submitted to the first stage: most of the projects focused on giving an answer to the measurable needs, while refraining from critical response to the proposed vision; the second type did not manage to give an answer to the measurable needs, or ignored most of them, and related to the vision only; the third type – some ten projects – presented a critical position towards the proposed vision, in the framework of the response to the measurable needs. The critical position presented in the projects of the first stage was discussed at the conclusion of this stage in the course of a reexamination of the vision for the new building, and the conclusions of this discussion were used in the judging and in the guidelines given to the participants in the second and third stages.

### **Programmatic Freedom**

The discussion of the ramifications of the program's design specification also touches on the question of programmatic freedom. This term sums up one of the chief dilemmas in writing a program: the degree of detail. The greater the degree of detail in the program, the less "programmatic freedom", and the more limited the planner's ability to maneuver among the program's guidelines. On the other hand, detailing about the spaces that the sponsor has specific expectations for, or that are of major importance for the project, may help in obtaining the desired planning outcome. A balanced program probably requires a progressive method of detailing, in which the more important the space is, the greater the degree of detailing provided. In such a method there is relatively little room for deviation from the guidelines in the important spaces – while for less important spaces the program gives minimal or partial detail in order to facilitate planning flexibility.

The most conspicuous evidence of the "programmatic freedom" given in the program for the architectural competition for the Tel Aviv Museum of Art is the great diversity of solutions suggested by the three prizewinners for the planning of the exhibition galleries. The exhibition galleries had received special emphasis in the program, which was expressed in the extent and the high degree of detail of the requirements for each gallery. These were based on a fundamental decision to prefer galleries of the "white cube" type, which can be adapted to exhibits of various kinds and to displays that vary in character. In contrast to the high degree of detailing for the galleries, the relations and connections among them were not defined, and were left to the planner's interpretation.

The three prizewinning proposals presented solutions that were significantly different from one another, and each of them, in its own way, contained implicit critical reference to the very act of defining exhibition galleries and their place in the Museum. The solution proposed by Ada Karmi-Melamede and Ram Karmi was based on the conventional approach, which concentrates on orthogonal galleries (as requested in the program) situated along a linear corridor, orthogonal as well. The interpretation of Yehoshua Gutman and Lluís Ortega I Cerda, in contrast, extends the definition of the gallery in the program and proposes a solution that answers the needs defined there but at the same time makes possible additional situations – such as combining all the galleries to create one large gallery, or a variable definition of the gallery's space. The winning project by Preston Scott Cohen is an example of a middle ground, which responds punctiliously to the program's characterization of the gallery, but also presents a distinctive solution to the position of the galleries in the overall spatial organization of the building.

An architectural program is therefore a delicate balance among needs, a vision, and an opening for the planner's personal interpretation. As such it is at constant risk of imbalance. The best solution for imbalance is awareness, for a conscious characterization tends by nature to be more balanced, since it is an outcome of a discussion of the ramifications of the various directions. An architectural program is distinctive in the fact that with all the difficulty that becomes apparent in the evaluation of its balance in the idea stage, at the end of the process it is translated into an actual building that represents the equilibrium physically and withstands the test of the sponsor and the

consumers. It is my heartfelt hope that the new building of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art will answer the need and will reflect an appropriate vision of a contemporary museum that houses art, design and architecture of our times.

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### **Notes**

1 Program: a plan, a drawing of the principal lines for a particular action, from the Greek: pro-in advance; gramma-writing (The Even-Shoshan Dictionary).