

Design and Boundaries: Exploring the Boundary Relations within the Context of Interactive Family-Oriented Museum Space

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The problem of designing family-oriented museum space is ripe with opportunities stemming from the complex matrix of relationships between the collections, curators, educational objectives, and spatial parameters. These same relationships are rife with complexities and potentially competing agendas. Our brief will focus on the edges that exist where these ideologies meet, both in terms of the dynamic design process and as it relates to the resultant architectural space of the Getty Family Room. We are fascinated with how these slippages and inherently unpredictable forces have the ability to reshape interactive environments in a positive, and sometimes negative way.

The new Getty Family Room project is simple in concept – a space that introduces families to art concepts and activities. As a built work it is also quite easy to engage and occupy. However, this simplified experiential understanding veils the complex and dynamic relationships that underpin the project. The accumulated evolutionary design process of testing, learning, discarding, and saving is hidden from sight, but this invisibility is in a way a project also – one that deserves to be “exhibited,” revealed, and critiqued. In the case of the Getty Family Room, this involved an expanded field of client, consultants, specialists, and a series of nuanced negotiations across the various disciplinary boundaries. In addition, boundaries between institution and project, new and existing, and young and old become important areas to re-visit. These boundaries deserve a special focus – because the way that these edges are defined, approached, engaged, or ignored can mean radically different results for each project. From the architect’s perspective, this becomes critical to formulating a process, a project, and ultimately a practice. From the larger design team’s perspective, how this happens can mean success or failure for the project.

For a diminutive space of 800 square feet, there was an expansive design team formulated under the direction of the Getty for the design of the Family Room. The following list represents the impressive and large core “conceptual” design team: administrators, curators, facilities managers, exhibition designers, child development specialists, education specialists, art educators, museum directors, museum consultants, architects, facilities managers, and specialized engineers.

Within this matrix, like a physics experiment, there exists the potential for a myriad of both negative and positive forces to be exerted and ultimately shape the project. Among the more infamous project killers are: turf wars, design by committee, information overload, too many cooks, righteousness, aesthetes, egos, snobbery, and purists. All of these appear to be at odds with an idealized process – one that begins with strong informational and conceptual underpinnings, a rigorous and well managed cooperative development of these ideas into

compelling spatial, educational, and experiential realities – ultimately expressed in a clear and compelling project where success can be tangibly measured at many levels.

With so many parties involved, so many different boundaries, how can a project ever achieve this elusive goal? Should most of the trust and responsibility be placed in the hands of the architect? Are all of these bodies really contributing to a better project? Is all of that information really necessary or even possible to synthesize? Is this the best way to organize a project? At a certain point doesn't the ratio of square footage to number of parties around a conference table become absurd?

These become important questions with regards to the structure of the design process and in particular to the way in which boundaries are defined. To test this theory we will first look at a few comparative models of the design process with the architect positioned in different ways, and then re-focus on the actual Family Room project to explore some specific relationships and their effects.

Let's start with the so-called "empowered architect scenario." (This scenario could also be called the heroic model or the Howard Roark model from the architect in Ayn Rand's Novel "The Fountainhead"):

In this scenario the architect is handed an initial brief that details parameters of the project. He can then return to his studio, read some books, study the latest child developmental issues, and brush up on his exhibition design. He can speak with his children and come back with a brilliant design. There is no need to keep crossing boundaries; in fact many specialists can be eliminated from the project team altogether saving money and time. This model has its distinct advantages. In it boundaries are sacred and not to be crossed. They allow for a productive autonomy. The boundary is just that – a boundary, protective and shielding. The parties understand their roles and respect one another (or at least pretend to). The architect can completely control the situation. The architect can design the one "true" scheme – not options, not watered down variations. There are no meddlers, no closet designers, no committees, and no political correctness. The architect can claim full authorship for a "director's cut" design.

But wait. Is this so smart for the architect; is this so smart for design in general? Is this an old and outmoded model? What about all those amazing and potentially new ideas that were never aired or considered? And how about those critical areas of input that the architect failed to consider? And who will take responsibility for a project high on aesthetics and low on content. The client?

Modernism may have shattered previous models of architecture, but it largely perpetuated the heroic role of the singular (often white and male) architect, and often white and often content-less architecture. Does this model not still linger in the air of museums? And what does singularity and heroic vision ultimately yield? Further, what place does a rarified heroism have in the presence of children who will just destroy it?

Lets explore another scenario as an alternate: let's call this one the "submissive architect scenario":

This architect or architectural group aims to please everyone. Like a puppy that desperately wants love and shies away from difficult and confrontational situations, this architect will quickly and expeditiously enable design by committee. This architect opens up the boundary floodgates and takes expeditious notes of oversimplified translations. Like an allergic reaction, formerly closed cell membranes become instantly permeable, allowing the most contamination possible between disciplines. This architect will single-handedly reduce the infinite number of exciting design potentials to one heaping loveable politically correct pile of building, and will tend to treat children as some kind of limited destructive organism that only responds to large primary-colored geometric shapes, or computer screens with mindless rudimentary games. But hey, that's what the public wants – right? Wrong. Its what they've been conditioned to expect.

But wait again – there's hope. Lets take a look at one other version.

Let's call this version the "projective practice" because it sounds cool and is very topical right now:

First off – the architect is no longer singular in any way and no longer heroic and no longer really an architect proper. This new approach and practice is all about hybridity, collaboration, cross boundary dressing, intelligence eavesdropping, and the erosion of authorship. More Buddhist, less Catholic. The architect as content and information steward. A new flesh adaptable negotiator design body. You want it you got it.

This "open" model is all about digging into the space of the boundary and exploiting its edges. The projective practice sees that where two things meet, a new third space is created, a hybrid space that is fertile with possibility: Where curation meets architecture – bang!, where childhood developmental issues meet material explorations – bang!, where art concepts meet spatial containers – bang!. The meeting of edges in this sense becomes a kind of conceptual detonation point, a performative zone to capitalize upon. In this scenario ideas and information are thought of on equal footing. It doesn't matter where or who initiates a good idea, or valuable information. What matters is how it is handled, cared for, nurtured and deployed. This form of reciprocity across boundaries is akin to passing a marshmallow across a fire. A perfectly golden crust with a soft and melted interior requires an exacting negotiation between the two sides.

For this model to work in a maximal way, the traditional models of heroism and submission must be fully suppressed. The architect must be willing to fully engage the various parties that have come to the table – to move into their territory, immerse themselves in their lingo and sub-cultures, and they must be honest about their ignorance and naïveté. The architect must be willing to consider ideas that at first seem foreign, trite, and irrelevant. The architect must be willing to subject their process to open scrutiny, and at times uncomfortable situations. Most importantly, they must also be willing to challenge and provoke the committee and consultants, not to accept clichés, and not to be fearful of tension. For this kind of process to be fully

exploited, it requires a generous reading on the part of the architect and an enormous willingness to test the team's postulations.

Within this model, the architect becomes the master interpreter instead of the just plain Master or the mis-interpreter. In order for this role to properly function, the various other parties on the design team must recognize two important pieces of information. First, they must recognize that they are active contributors to a dynamic design process, and that their thoughts, knowledge, and information is critical to establishing a robust conceptual base for the project and a reciprocal dialogue between specialized areas and a general solution. Secondly, they must acknowledge that the architectural team must ultimately coordinate, interpret, and most importantly test spatial manifestations. Therefore the design team must be willing to see their thoughts pass through a sieve of translation and remain open to the resulting experimentation. They must understand that this is an iterative model with constant editing and re-consideration. And the larger design team must remain open to the fact that the architect is the expert in their discipline.

This type of process is inherently based on tension. Tension actually defines and makes visible the new space where boundaries meet. Tension in this model is embraced and exploited.

So, we are obviously promoting this kind of model, and to a degree idealizing it, but clearly there are risks associated with it. For example, if the architect does not exert the right balance of control and submission, the scales could easily tip in either direction. The issue of border crossing and hybridity also becomes tricky. To naïvely cross over any boundary one risks the possibility of being tainted, co-opted, or even corrupted. And to forcefully hybridize, one could accidentally create a monstrous mix instead of a handsome new version. These are very similar boundary issues as one finds in biotechnology, only less dangerous. Open scrutiny also comes at a cost. This generally implies a much more laborious and intensive process for the architect, where the demonstration of ideas is iterative and slowly defined. And if the architect loses control of this process, the design will suffer greatly. Furthermore, the architect needs to become more objective about the design and be willing to suspend personal feelings. Provoking the client implies that the client is willing to be provoked, which isn't always the case. To expect the great variety of specialists to come to the table with equally open perspectives and a willingness to engage the space of the boundary is a bit absurd. So, the architect and key leaders from the client group must attempt to energize this atmosphere from the start. All of this puts a tremendous amount of pressure and responsibility on the architect to perform a surgical translation and assimilation. On the other hand, it also spreads out the liability and credit across the group.

Let's re-visit the Getty Family Room, not as a case study per se, but again as a specific example to focus a larger discourse upon.

We would like to first show a quick overview of the project with a synopsis of the key components and the main conceptual ideas.

Like a budding flower with extended roots, the new Family Room stitches the informal/local activity of experiencing art through intuitive play to the larger experience of the Getty's collections.

The design of the project is based on a series of oppositions that react in a complimentary way to Meier's design for the campus. While the Getty may be thought of as an extensive, permanent, monochromatic, and formally based project, the Family Room is conceived as a diminutive, temporary, polychromatic, experientially based room within a room.

The project is made up of two concentric components: the first consists of six "coves" within the existing "white box" gallery. Each cove relates to one of the six areas of the Getty's collections: Drawing, Illuminated Manuscripts, Photography, Painting, Sculpture, and French Decorative Arts. Nestled together like a Rubik's cube, and scaled to human height within a 20-foot cubic gallery, each cove contains a focused activity that relates to a specific work of art. Against the backdrop of these pieces, a spectrum of educational objectives and art/developmental issues are addressed via intuitive and experientially based engagement, and using both fine and gross motor skills. There is little text in the entire project. Each cove is lined in an intense color that is amplified or contrasted in a complimentary way to color sampled from the representative artworks. The exterior surface of these mini-spaces is a reflective, continuous skin, occasionally interrupted by views inside the coves, through lenses, or child-scaled cutouts.

While the coves are focused and isolated, perimeter "treasure hunt" walls intermittently punctuate the outer wall of the gallery. Following "tongues" of color from the coves, these fragmentary walls are embedded with objects and detailed images that one views through a series of peepholes. The images and objects within relate to the broader collection in the galleries and create a link between childhood/family fun and the lifelong experience of enjoying art. The peepholes can be experienced casually, or in a more structured and challenging atmosphere, where the venture might extend into the actual galleries.

Now, let's explore in a more specific way some of the boundary dynamics that relate to this project.

The design of interactive space, and specifically, family-oriented museum space inherently synthesizes architecture, interior design, exhibition, education, technology, art, and even urbanism and landscape. This is an exciting and daunting list of ingredients that could ultimately manifest itself as isolated ideas within the same space, or as a carefully orchestrated and choreographed assembly where traditional boundaries are broken down and exciting new possibilities emerge.

To start with the more general boundaries of new versus existing, the obvious polar considerations are either establishing a respectful or assertive relationship. Should the new space have an embracing identity with respect to the larger sphere? Is the new space an extension of curatorial ideas that are already established? Can or should the museum be a "subject" of critique at a number of different levels from content to philosophy to architecture? Is the new space a freestanding independent exhibition? Is it seen as an instrumental link to a larger set of issues?

Our attitude as it relates to these issues, is that the new family room as a space should be neither critical nor embracing, but rather performative and instrumental. In other words, instead of just

containing exhibition material and being an independent space within the larger campus or establishing a strong stance toward the existing, it should try to perform at several different levels, activating many different boundaries, be they conceptual, educational, spatial, material, atmospheric, etc. And, like an instrument, it should bring something about and begin to register these events, like an awareness of a larger set of issues, or a concrete connection to a specific work of art, or the identification of something everyday like a bug.

We view these actions as very specific engagements with boundary conditions, where the edges are pulled, twisted, tied together, and fused.

In a way it would have been easy to critique Meier's work and establish a kind of rebelliousness. It would have been even easier yet to cloak our project within the white 30-inch grid, but a more interesting approach for us is to conceptually sample from his work, exploring the space between the existing body and the new. This allows it to be an active part of our design process where it would be transformed into something very different.

Instead of announcing a critical agenda, or an accommodating agenda, I believe that we were all interested in more of an enabling agenda.

How about the very real and very specific meeting of boundaries within the various disciplines and architecture? Does exploiting and engaging these have measurable impact and affect? Let's look at some examples both positive and negative.

Take facilities and architecture: it's clear that facilities is a constant thorn in the side of the architect, always presenting codes, barriers and rules that can't be broken. This is traditionally a meeting of worlds where the defined boundary comes in handy, and the architect is typically looking for red flags and only enough dialogue to understand the problems. But can something that at first glance appears mundane actually be a boundary waiting to be properly engaged? Can technical issues like cleaning, maintenance, and exiting actually be informative and informational at a conceptual level? Instead of a barrier to full aesthetic realization, can they be considered a way of helping the project to perform and be more fully realized?

Many of our material choices and consequently atmospheric effects for the Family Room were motivated by discussions at this level. Flow, exiting, and movement issues had a major role in determining the basic organization of the space. Further, long term consequences for the project stem out of the dialogues that emerge from these boundaries. A commitment to a long term, holistic view of maintenance has radically different consequences versus a reactive stance.

Or, let's look at the relationship between curatorship and architecture. The traditional relationship, which maintains a stable boundary, looks at architectural space as containing something that has been curated. But, if one begins to examine the meeting of these two areas at a micro level, you will discover that there is a lot of common DNA. From the architect's perspective this seems like a tremendous opportunity to explore a hybrid of curatorship and architecture. An open view of this idea from the curator's perspective could mean new translations; interpretations or understandings of artwork translated into an architectural

vocabulary. And in a complimentary way the architecture could affect curatorial methods or decisions. However, there is a structure of value and authenticity that pervades the curator's world and creates an inherent difference in relation to architecture. This desire for authenticity can be crippling to exhibition space when taken too literally, or unsuccessful when forcibly hybridized with incompatible architectural space.

The boundaries that have traditionally divided educational intent and architectural space are well known. Often in interactive environments there is barely a discernible interest between the two. In fact the educational objectives often seem to be in direct opposition to the architectural ones. From the architect's perspective education typically equals a lot of text or computers. And from the educator's perspective architecture is often thought of as just a shell to support their objectives. The space where these boundaries meet is in fact an incredibly potent space that has barely begun to be exploited. During our early dialogues for the Family Room with education specialists we established a series of objectives that attempted to stitch into the architecture a spectrum of developmental issues, art concepts, activities and intelligences to be explored. Examples of these are, gross and fine motor skills, teamwork, interactivity, abstraction, perception, recognition, composition, distillation, and elaboration. This spectrum of ideas served to establish the fundamental architectural concepts and the identity of the coves, reinforcing the fusion of spatial design and the educational agenda. Furthermore, in contrast to those of the traditional art galleries and other family based interactive spaces the team's intention was to include minimal text and to have a goal of intuitive, approachable, and direct hands-on contact.

In conclusion, it is clear that there are successes and failures that stem from these explorations. Just because we are now talking in the language of hybridity, overlap, and performance there is no guarantee of success. In fact, there are many emerging architectural and interactive examples that tend to take this terminology too literally, fail to understand the potential, or mismanage a very complex series of steps.

However, future explorations of new boundary formulations and definitions have the real potential to open up larger questions and conceptual issues that begin to be quite interesting at a philosophical and political level. How can interactive spaces position themselves in new ways within a discourse of authenticity and artifice? Can this, or should this line be further broken down? Is the new space a facsimile of the original? Does it assert an identity beyond the curatorial agenda of the institution or collections? Is the new space ghettoized or is it intentionally inserted into the main gallery fabric? Is there a more radical engagement with the actual art?

Questions like these, if followed, could lead to a more progressive re-thinking of family based interactive space, and open up territory long understood as fixed. We are incredibly excited by some of the outcomes in the Getty Family Room as a result of an assertive boundary engagement, and are excited to see this level of exploration engender a more continual and intelligent evolution.