

# INSTITUTION, ORGANISATION, SPACE - READING SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND SENDAI MEDIATHEQUE

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In this paper Seattle Public Library designed by OMA/LMN and Sendai Mediatheque designed by Toyo Ito are investigated as specific operational modes when it comes to the relation between institution, organisation and space. These modes suggests fundamentally different attitudes towards change and the future unknown, and where the spatial design is a key factor. This paper investigates spatial design as a integral part in the shaping of institutional and organisational practices.

## INTRODUCTION

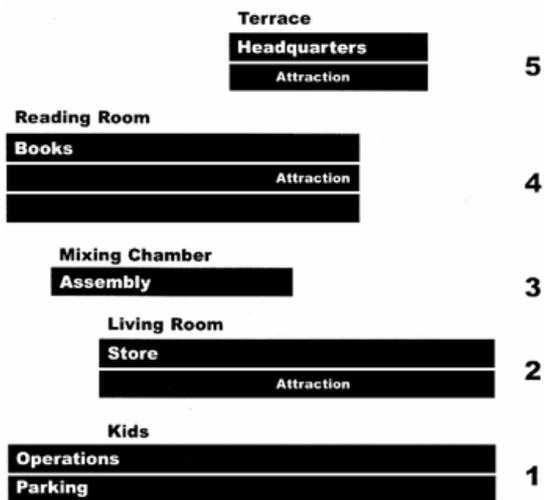
These readings where initially introduced in an ongoing discussion with the staff of Konsthallen in Gothenburg and particularly with its director Lene Crone Jensen. As a way of discussing the organisational forms of contemporary art institutions such as Konsthallen different operative modes where introduced as models<sup>1</sup>. Out of these the library was singled out as particularly interesting in its public commitment and its different operative modes of interacting with a heterogenic "public". Further more the shift from archives and storages to nodes and interfaces are similar to that which we find in contemporary art institutions. The case of Seattle

Public Library (SPL) and Sendai Mediatheque (SMT) where singled on the basis of three factors. First of all, their explicit design addressing the introduced issues. Secondly, the processes behind these projects has been fairly well documented and moreover published in two recent publications by ACTAR<sup>2</sup>. Last but not least these two projects display explicitly different attitudes towards design, organisation and the future unknown. As such these projects are powerful tools of discussing the relation between the institutional (what an organisation aims to be), the organisational (how this is organised) and the spatial (how this is materialised), not only post-factum, but more importantly in our work with future organisations and designs.

## SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Like many of OMA´s building the Seattle Public Library project was well known long before it could open up for its first guests the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2004. In the invited competition OMA first set out to *comb* the competition program. The 15 program categories: 0 Parking, 1 Public Forum, 2 Entrance, 3 Readers Forum, 4 General Information and Periodicals, 5 Children´s Center, 6 Young Adults, 7 Tech Learning, 8 Main Collection, 9 Main Collection, 11 Main Collection, 12 Government and Law, 13 Collection Services, 14 Operations and 15 Administration where eventually trimmed down to 9 categories: 1 Parking, 2 Kids, 3 Staff, 4 Living Room, 5 Meeting, 6 Mixing Chamber, 7 Book Spiral, 8 Reading Room and 9 HQ. In their

## The Seattle Public Library



Seattle Public Library: Spatial Program  
 Image: <http://www.spl.org/lfa/central/oma/OMAbook1299/page38.htm>

proposal they write “Our first operation was to “comb” and consolidate the library’s apparently ungovernable proliferation of program and media. By combing like with like, we identified a set of programmatic clusters – five of stability, four of instability”<sup>3</sup> The five (Parking, Staff, Meeting, Spiral and HQ) were shuffled in relation to the four (Kids, Living Room, Mixing Chamber and Reading Room). These were defined as *platforms* in comparison to the four which are defined as *spaces*. These although different are all “architecturally defined and equipped for maximum dedicated performance”.<sup>4</sup> The spaces were to be “trading floors where librarians inform and stimulate, where the interface between the different platforms is organized”<sup>5</sup>. The 9 volumes or boxes are then repositioned in order to improve the lighting conditions and views according to each element. Further on OMA establish a set of *inventions* such as the *book spiral*. Here, the media volumes are arranged in continuous spiralling floor in order to avoid departmentization. The *mixing chamber* is a response to the “infernal matrix of materials, technologist, “specialists.”...The mixing chamber is an area of maximum librarian-patron interaction.” The combination of the book-spiral and the mixing chamber aims for an immediate correspondence between patron, librarian and the stored media volumes.

OMA states that their “ambition is to redefine / reinvent the Library as an institution no longer

exclusively dedicated to the book, but as an information store, where all media - new and old - are presented under a regime of new equalities”<sup>6</sup>. They point out that “Flexibility in recent libraries - San Francisco, Denver, Phoenix - has been conceived as the creation of floors on which almost any library activity can happen. Programs are not separated, rooms or individual spaces not given unique character. In practice, it means that the bookshelves define generous reading areas at the opening, then expand inexorably to encroach on public space. Ultimately, in this form of flexibility, the Library strangles its own attractions.”<sup>7</sup>

OMA’s response can be categorized into a set of operations. First of all there is the *combing* and reformulation of the program. These reformulations are backed up the new role which the library aspires for. It is also supported by the analysis of the organisational behaviour of libraries in general done by OMA. This is a form of branding which extends beyond the institutional, as in the naming-and-framing, through the organisational straight into the spatial. OMA’s primary tool of intervention is that of architectonic space. The book spiral addresses the way different departments are bracketed into meta-categories in order to fit floors. OMA argues that the traditional organisation of libraries is flatness and that the book spiral is a return to these fundamentals. No more meta-categories, just one level, just one floor. What is notable here is the way the spatial order bleeds into the organisational and vice versa, that they can never be fully separated or dealt with one at the time. The imprint which the built spaces have had on the organisation of volumes is telling of this reciprocity. Obviously the spatial cannot be fully understood as a consequence of the organisational, or the institutional. In cases like this it is clear that the spatial exists in the organisational not as space but rather as delimitations and constrains, as the imaginable

The mixing chamber reveals a similar spatial operation. From having been located in different departments according to their area of expertise the librarian now are active on two spatial levels. First of all, a few with particular expertise are still closely connected specific departments. A new space is added, the mixing chamber, the “trading floor of information”, an area which you have to pass through in order to reach the book spiral. This is the information gateway from which you if necessary can be directed to a particular librarian, or otherwise be directed to your volume in the book spiral. The point here is the separation of the order of books and the order of librarians. In traditional libraries

these orders are synonymous and parallel, categorized into meta-orders. But the expansion and differentiation of these orders have crippled their accessibility, especially for those less experienced patrons, such as first-time or low-frequency visitors. These patrons are also particularly hard to reach. The mixing room as an information hub independent of the order of books, allows the librarian to act fully on the librarian-patron relation. The new spatial conditions not only displace the work done by librarians, it also changes it. Again the spatial informs the organisational and consequently the institutional.

What OMA does is to update the library as institution and as organisation by spatial means. Their design adjusts and tunes the organisation to the present and to the hopefully future conditions. Their design empowers the organisation to do what they always have been doing but in a more appropriate and informed way according to current demands and expectations. As such it suits well in a planning tradition where everything more or less can be planned. All you have to do is have some kind of buffer (as in additional space in the book-spiral) and some informal loop-holes (the four instable spaces). This is a tradition where the future can be reasonably contained and delimited and as such it is governed by this present now and future past. This is a tradition where they future is not allowed to come as surprise and as such future novelties and inventions are sacrificed on behalf of continuity and order. In this sense OMA and most of their design proposals are less revolutionary than we might think, leaving little space for the future unimaginable.

## SENDAI MEDIATHEQUE

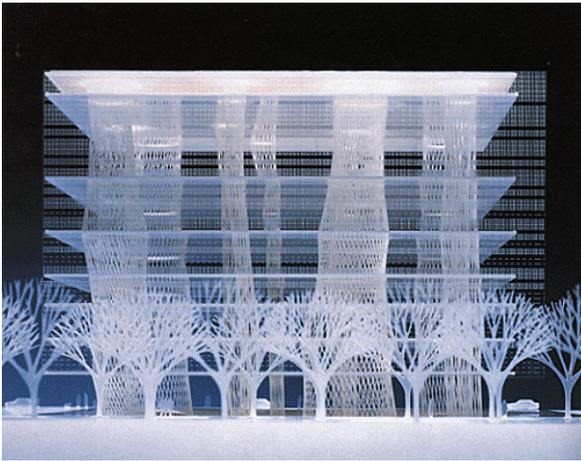
This is also the key issue of the other example; Sendai Mediatheque in Sendai, Japan. In the competition in 1995 that which was asked for was a new building type or typology. The competition program was an amalgamation of four different programs: Sendai Civic Gallery, Sendai Public Library, Sendai Audiovisual Learning Centre and a information services center for the audiovisually impaired. With projects like ZKM in Karlsruhe (by Schweger & Partner, notably an early OMA proposal that was abandoned) and Carré d'Art in Nîmes (by Norman Foster) in mind the competition guidelines included six "considerations": 1 Multifunctionality, 2 Art (exhibition space, workshop space and a media center), 3 Data media ( a place not for merely looking

for books but also information), 4 Operations (Unification and reduced compartmentalization), 5 Urbanism (global and local), and finally: 6 Design competition (transparency).

Toyo Ito's approach was to not to apply a specific form of building to a specific form of program but rather to build "a system capable of meeting any and all programmatic conditions that might arise."<sup>8</sup> What was proposed was *differentiated spatialities* where it was stated that to designate "spaces specific to isolated functions is to limit free action."<sup>9</sup> Instead what the building design aspired for was to "allow users to discover new spaces and new uses for themselves."<sup>10</sup>

Ito's nearly abstract and simplistic design is made out three independent architectural elements; *plates* (floors), *tubes* (columns) and *skins* (façades). Each floor was given its own height, in order to create a spatial differentiation, and the nine load-bearing tubes, ranging from 2 to 9 meters in diameter, where to serve as "vertical transports and energy core connections, housing elevators, stairways, ducts and cables... air supply and exhaust flues"<sup>11</sup> as well as distributing natural light to the lower levels. The double-paned glass screen or skin is designed not only to respond to the different directions but also to change the buildings appearance throughout the day. In the initial proposal the whole program was handled in this *plates, tubes* and *skin* scheme. There where no additional walls or partitions, no additional shafts or columns. This was a floating space with no particularized forms. In the end, in the completed building this was not possible and partition walls and doors has been added when necessary. The spatial distinctiveness was further developed by a lighting design where each floor was given individual lighting schemes with different chromatic temperatures.

The general idea of this project is summed up in Ito's concept of *blurring*. The notion of *blurring* originates from the touring exhibition "Blurring Architecture" which ran during 1999 and 2000 in Aachen and Tokyo and later on in Antwerpen and Copenhagen (Louisiana). Here Sendai Mediatheque was displayed in its full virtuality. Different design proposals and design stages was layered and projected as trans-temporal collages upon the exhibition walls. It is from this crossing of temporal and spatial thresholds that the notion emerges. Additionally it is to be understood in the distinct spatial although non-programmatic particularities which Sendai Mediatheque is comprised of. It is a movement against compartmentalization and an attempt to open up



Sendai Mediatheque: Concept model  
 Image: <http://archive-www.smt.city.sendai.jp/ja/data/mediatheque/competition/profile.html>

*ambiguous thresholds.* By means of space the programmatic features are intended to *blur* into each other. The floors are intended to *blur* into each other by means of the tubes and building and its surrounding is intended to *blur* into each other by means of the skin.

In working with and developing the program the Program Study Committee coordinated by Akira Suzuki came to the conclusion that they had to “avoid fixing the program”<sup>12</sup>. Here Sendai Mediatheque was defined as a node or hub rather than a center or a terminal, a place where the networking potential was maximized. A key factor in this process was the extensive workshop activities, which was “conceived as an open-ended activity rather than one leading to a conclusion of a goal”<sup>13</sup>. Where staff and guests are encouraged “to make plans and execute them, searching for new ways to use this facility”<sup>14</sup>.

The term *Mediatheque* was adopted by Arata Isozaki when he was asked to preside over the competition jury. This notion proved important to infuse a sense of novelty into the project and it came to manifest the “spirit” in the project. Together with Toyo Ito’s building design and the idea of workshops this was “the three main pillars on which the Sendai Mediatheque was founded”<sup>15</sup>. This is a case where the institutional (the notion of the Mediatheque), the organisational (the idea of the workshops) and the spatial (Ito’s building design) not only run side by side or are treated as responses to each other. Rather they are three parallel and different strategies opening up for discrepancies and reinterpretations. Together they form an open system where there is no consistent

whole but rather a range of virtualities. The ambition is to “leave the possibilities for future change open”<sup>16</sup>.

In terms of physical space this means that “the limits of each space are not strictly defined. They work as both room space and circulation space, as a sort of buffer zones between functions. Spaces have names but they appear as a succession of activities”<sup>17</sup>. The number of partition walls have been minimized which opens up the connections between different spaces. You are able to sense the different degree of activities going on within them. Something which in turn helps you adapting yourself to present conditions, but also to find your own way, your own space and your own use. A part of this strategy is to work with furniture instead of walls, furniture being easier to move around. Furniture implies a higher degree of interaction being open to different uses and making it possible to create new and additional spatial configurations and demarcations. The task to design furniture on each floor was assigned to independent designers such as Kazuo Sejima, Karim Rashid and K.T. Architecture. Even here different strategies are employed whereas Kazuo Sejima designed a “flower chair in the shape of a trefoil...combined in various ways creating different spatial organisations”<sup>18</sup>, K.T. Architecture was asked by the librarians to design specific furniture for each function. Instead they “worked on large-scaled furniture of simple geometry which could respond to many functions, hopefully also unforeseen requirements”<sup>19</sup>.

Here furniture generates space and use. Large-scale structures for multiple uses, fixes and dedicates space, structures which only can be rearranged or moved by collective effort. They have a wall-like effect, stabilizing the use, setting limits and directions although not permanently. They offer possibilities to tune in with present conditions and to try things out. Sets of commonly sized furniture are used not only by the organisation and staff to direct the use of space but also by individual and groups of visitors. In opposition to conditions where dedicated spaces or “rooms” defines use; the use and dedication of space is set by the way it is furnished. In this way some of operative initiative is distributed from management, directors, designers and architects down to staff and guests, thus opening up for that which could imagined, planned for or foreseen.

This is another kind of planning than which we find in the Seattle Project. It is open to the future. It does not treat the future as a something which have to be put in its place, but as something which not only is about

improving or calibrating but actually; changing. This planning strategy where the initiative not only are shifted and distributed hierarchically but also temporal, over days, weeks, years and eventually decades leaves no room for passivity. It demands activity and reflection in order not return to default, into a traditional teleological planning process. The shift is more dramatic than it may seem. In the case of Seattle the continuity is maintained by means of architectonic space and materiality. Space has become the institutional and organisational meme which guarantees the consistency of the organisation. In Sendai space leaves no promises or guarantees. Consistency and continuity can only be assured through organisational mean, through staff and visitors and their future commitment.

#### CONCLUSION: ORGANIZING - DESIGNING

The Seattle and Sendai projects points at two different kinds of institutional, organisational and spatial realities. Moreover these realities in comparison are not only about the qualities of space, their design. They must also be put in relation to the operative work conducted within these organisations. As such these built environments calls for different modes and degrees of individual and collective interaction. If Seattle where to be a motorboat; being able to be manoeuvred by a single captain, Sendai would surely be a sailing ship; requiring collective effort to get going. In most cases we plan and design our environment and organisations in order to be motorboats, where the argument in most cases is economical. One could also argue the other way around. Might it not once in a while be worthwhile to spend less money on building environments and spending more money on keeping staff operative within them? Again there are many reason for this reality, one being the money spent on building usually not are the money spent on staff. These funds are not interchangeable. But then again there must also be a place for sailing boats. Making your way on the seven seas is not only about speed and horse-powers; there are also other worthwhile experiences to be made. This also implies a other kind of design task, which is not only about increasing performance by reducing contingencies, by abolishing friction. A task which is about opening up for the less straight forward and wickedly crooked, opening up for the uncertain which we only can about with collective effort.

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<sup>1</sup> Benesch, H, 2006, Några tankar kring hur vi tänker och kan tänka kring rum för konst och framför allt samtidskonst (Seminar Paper)

<sup>2</sup> Kubo, M and Prát, R. (eds), 2005, "Seattle Public Library", ACTAR

Sakamoto, T. and Ferré, A. (eds.) 2003, "Sendai Mediatheque", ACTAR

<sup>3</sup> Kubo, M and Prát, R. (eds), 2005, "Seattle Public Library", ACTAR

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Sakamoto, T. and Ferré, A. (eds.) 2003, "Sendai Mediatheque", ACTAR

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid