

2009 School of Architecture Writing Award Finalist:

A New Unity

The Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art

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## A New Unity

The Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland, was begun in 1992 after the decision was made to build a freestanding building in which to display contemporary artwork. Previously a part of the Finnish National Gallery, the \$45 million museum officially opened on May 29, 1998. Designed by Steven Holl, the five story metal and glass building was constructed in association with Juhani Pallasmaa of Helsinki. A building competition was open to all native architects as well as four specially selected international candidates, one of whom was Holl.

The museum chose a hallowed site in the heart of Helsinki on which to build its new, freestanding building. The site, located between Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Hall, Eliel Saarinen's train station, the neoclassical-style Finnish Parliament building, and Toolo Bay, proved to be challenging and controversial. The piece of land had previously been part of Finnish architect Alvar Aalto's master plan for the city and was also the site of a statue honoring Finland's only nationally recognized war hero- Marshal Carl Mannerheim (Stein par. 1). Holl successfully met the challenge of fusing together the historically significant aspects of the site and a contemporary art museum with his anonymous competition entry titled "Chiasma" (Stein par. 4). Holl viewed the site as a crossroads of nature and culture, and thus chose to name his project "Chiasma" which is a Greek word suggesting intertwining. The selection committee found

the word to be an accurate representation of their expectations, so the word was translated Kiasma and chosen to identify the museum (Lord par. 2).

Despite the project's popularity with the selection committee, its public unveiling came with much dismay. *The Helsingin Sanomat*, a large newspaper in Finland, described the proposal observing, "No cultural event or building project has ever been the object of such sharp-tongued, broad-based and long-standing debate" (Marmer par. 3). Holl's original proposal was a simple intertwining of two shapes featuring twenty-five interconnected galleries of various sizes and shapes. It also featured a "wall of ice"- a curved wall of glass gently framing the statue of Manner-heim, which Holl proposed to be moved 30 feet from its original location (Stein par. 5). Following the design's public unveiling, veterans who opposed altering the location of the Manner-heim statue organized a public protest (Stein par. 6). Thousands signed a petition demanding a referendum to prevent the construction of the building, and the design itself was criticized and compared to a submarine or a large metal pumpkin (Stein par. 6). The project moved forward, however, following a two-year delay. In accordance with public opinion, Holl decided to leave the statue in its original location. As construction began, the design, the designer's nationality, the museum's purpose, and the smallness of the proposed site all came under fire (Marmer par. 3). Despite these obstacles, the completed building sparked a change in public opinion. The museum has become a focal point in Helsinki, just as Alvar Aalto had originally planned for the same site years before. True to Holl's intentions, Kiasma has

become an intersection of time and place, and seems extraordinarily contented on its once controversial site (Stein par. 7, Marmer par. 4).

The word “Chaisma” literally translated means to intersect or cross over. Thus, Holl’s Kiasma Museum effectively brings together different aspects of Helsinki culture and tradition with a uniquely fused and interwoven building form. Instead of attempting to overshadow the museum’s well-established neighbors, Holl quietly introduces a simple form onto the awkward site. A long, rectangular piece extends to form the building’s entrance while a hull-like vault forms the gallery spaces (Lord par. 4). The main structure consists of a 400-foot long concrete spine curving in two directions from the south side of the building to the north side (Stein par. 12). The building features a curved roof of patinated zinc as well as exterior walls made mainly of polished aluminum and glass (Marmer par. 4). The reflective nature of the exterior is contrasted with the smooth, sweeping interior plaster walls that are emphasized by changing light patterns (Lord par. 4). The many curves and counter curves of the interior as well as the white plaster walls are reminiscent of Frank Lloyd Wright’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In fact, the two projects are very similar considering their conceptual beginnings, their unconventional forms, and their use of curvilinear ramps for circulation.

Frank Lloyd Wright was originally commissioned to design the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1943, marking the last major work in his career. Wright began working on the museum’s design nearly 50 years prior to the beginnings of the Kiasma Museum for Contemporary Art. However, some of

the museums' similarities are uncanny. From the beginning, both projects were widely criticized, even during planning stages. Consequentially, these criticisms coupled with other difficulties caused both projects to face major delays before they were completed. From the start, each designer sought not to replicate the traditional museum form, but to instead redefine the form. Frank Lloyd Wright said of the Guggenheim, "I do not wish to found another museum such has now exists in New York.... No such building as is now customary for museums could be appropriate for this one" (S.R.G. Foundation 1994, 5). Indeed, both museums are stark contrasts to traditional high-ceilinged galleries where art is traditionally displayed. The galleries designed by Wright and Holl seek to display artwork in a more intimate setting. This intimacy is seen in Holl's twenty-five galleries, each of a different, irregular shape; and in Wright's sloping ramp and gallery design. In addition, Wright and Holl designed lighting unconventionally, with the intention of combining natural and artificial lighting to achieve optimum viewing for visitors.

Furthermore, it seems that each designer originally conceptualized his project using one-word descriptions as inspiration. Holl's conceptual word, Chiasma, is reflected both in the museum's form and its use socially in Helsinki. Wright seemed drawn to the word "ziggurat" in early sketches for the Guggenheim (Chanchani 175). Several aspects of Wright's design are also evident in the ziggurats of ancient Babylon. For example, the museum's main ramp design is similar to the continuous sloping ramps of ancient ziggurats. The comparison is also evident in physical form, with Wright's design for the museum's main gallery basically consisting of a ziggurat-like form turned upside-

down, growing larger the higher it reaches. Holl's Kiasma also consists of irregular curvilinear forms, which form irregular shaped interior galleries and circulation space.

Although both museums incorporate ramps as a major means of circulation, the actual circulation plans are completely opposite. Wright intended a very rigid, obvious movement through the museum when he designed the Guggenheim's "drifting" system of ramps. Upon entering the museum, the visitor takes an elevator to the top of the ramp and moves continuously down through various gallery spaces back to the bottom of the main gallery (S.R.G. Foundation 1994, 21). In contrast to this very intentional approach to circulation, Holl incorporates ramps into a non-prescribed plan of movement. Due to the inclusion of multiple stairs, elevators, and ramps, many possible routes are created throughout the building. Passage between galleries is never axial, but diagonal, always returning to a central orientation (Lecuyer par. 7).

In a description of his building during the design phase, Wright penned, "Walls slant gently outward forming a giant spiral for a well-defined purpose: a new unity between beholder, painting, and architecture" (S.R.G. Foundation 1960, 19). With this seemingly simple statement, Wright perfectly characterized his masterpiece. Similarly, it seems that Holl's Kiasma Museum effectively addresses this "new unity" that Wright wrote about half a century earlier. With his design for Kiasma, Holl successfully defines his notion of a unified site, circumstance, and idea.

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