

# HISTORY AND TRENDS OF MODERN MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE

## HISTÓRIA E TENDÊNCIAS DA ARQUITETURA MODERNA DE MUSEUS

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**Abstract:** The article presents an analysis of the relationship between architectural trends in museum design and changing perceptions of the role of the museum in society. The study analyzes the social and cultural changes in the perception of museums that have brought about new trends in the organization of operation of museums and their architectural design. To analyze trends in the development of museum architecture, the authors consider examples of museum buildings from the 18th century to the present day. As a result, the study discloses the relationship between the transformation of architectural designs and the functions of the museum in a particular time period. The trend discovered is that museums are being reimagined as cultural centers, housing associated facilities like concert halls, libraries, restaurants, and children's areas as a result of the commercialization of museums. The new approach to building museums as large corporations is outlined. The study reviews the new experience in the creation of the image of museums that has started to reflect social, political, or cultural orientation, which can be seen in the works of F.L. Wright, D. Libeskind, or F. Gehry. The study gives insight into the trends of development of the modern museum that generally determine the future architecture of these objects.

**Keywords:** Museum. Contemporary art. Exhibition. Museum

corporation. Exhibition hall.

**Resumo:** O artigo apresenta uma análise da relação entre as tendências arquitetônicas no design de museus e a mudança das percepções do papel do museu na sociedade. O estudo analisa as mudanças sociais e culturais na percepção dos museus que trouxeram novas tendências na organização do funcionamento dos museus e de seu design arquitetônico. Para analisar as tendências no desenvolvimento da arquitetura de museus, os autores consideram exemplos de edifícios de museus desde o século 18 até os dias de hoje. Como resultado, o estudo revela a relação entre a transformação dos projetos arquitetônicos e as funções do museu em um determinado período de tempo. A tendência descoberta é que os museus estão sendo reimaginados como centros culturais, alojando instalações associadas como salas de concertos, bibliotecas, restaurantes e áreas infantis, como resultado da comercialização dos museus. A nova abordagem para a construção de museus como grandes corporações é delineada. O estudo analisa a nova experiência na criação da imagem dos museus que começou a refletir a orientação social, política ou cultural, que pode ser vista nas obras de F.L. Wright, D. Libeskind ou F. Gehry. O estudo dá uma visão das tendências de desenvolvimento do museu moderno que geralmente determinam a arquitetura futura destes objetos.

**Palavras-chave:** Museu. Arte contemporânea. Exposições. Museu corporativo. Salão de exposições.

## 1. Introduction

The cultural sector has suffered greatly from the events of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Vecco et al., 2022). However, the effects of the pandemic and forecasted economic and social crises (The World Bank, 2022) do not halt the work of cultural institutions. Up to 90% of museums had to close their doors to visitors in 2020, but in the following years most museums resumed their work, adapting to the new realities (European Commission, n.d.), and new ones began to open (Harris and McGivern, 2022). According to UNESCO, as of 2023, there are over 104,000 museums worldwide (UNESCO, 2021b). Such vitality of museums is due both to their important public mission and to the flexibility with which the institution reacts to changing realities. For example, Ernesto Ottone, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Culture, formulated the demand for museums in times of crisis: "meeting places of inspiration, sharing, and cultural mediation" (UNESCO, 2021a).

Since the establishment of the world's first public museum, the Ashmolean, in 1683 in Oxford (Ashmolean Museum Oxford, 2017), the concept of the museum as an institution has undergone significant transformations. The idea of a museum has been evolving and modifying along with changes in the life of society and its rapidly growing and shifting needs. Museums are gaining an increasing place in the life of modern society (Arnarskii, 2008, p. 448; Ikonnikova, 2004), which can be traced by the way the mission of a museum, formulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), has been developing over the past 60 years. In 1947, when the ICOM was founded, the idea of a museum was mainly expressed through the following tasks: educating visitors, organizing exhibitions, creating an infrastructure for the international circulation of cultural property, and preserving and restoring the cultural property. In 2023, the museum as an institution must not only continue to carry on the function of preservation and education but also respond to the demands of audiences, recognizing and supporting the diversity of audiences (International Council of Museums, n.d.-b). The ideas of accessibility, inclusivity, and sustainability have changed museums not only conceptually, but also in terms of their architecture and use of space.

The purpose of the current study is to trace the evolution of architectural concepts of museums under the influence of changes in the public role of museums and their perception by visitors.

## 2. Methods

Utilizing historical analysis (Groat and Wang, 2020), this paper highlights the main stages of transformation and trends in museum architecture from the 18th century to the beginning of the 21st century.

Analysis of documents provided by the ICOM is used to identify social and cultural changes in the public perception of museums and the traditional and modern construction of the museum space. The ICOM is an organization founded in 1946 that brings together museum professionals from different countries. Today the organization includes representatives from 138 countries. The long history of the organization allows us to trace back how the idea of a museum's mission and place in society has changed. The global nature of the organization implies that its activities not only reflect the changing needs of museum audiences in different countries but also, in turn, have a direct and indirect impact on museums in different countries. These reasons justify the choice of documents of this organization as materials for the study.

The following museums are considered to illustrate the identified trends: the Louvre Museum (Paris, France, founded in 1793), the Prado Museum (Madrid, Spain, founded in 1819), the Hermitage (St. Petersburg, Russia, founded in 1764), the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow, Russia, founded in 1892), the National Georges Pompidou Centre of Art and Culture in Paris (Paris, France, opened in 1971), the New Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow, Russia, founded in 1983), and the Acropolis Museum (Athens, Greece, founded in 2003).

## 3. Results and discussion

Traditional museums founded in the 18th and 19th centuries have a stable layout with enfilades of exhibition halls and invite the visitor to follow a route set by the curators to view the exhibit. This applies mainly to museums of fine arts, housed in buildings of the palace or temple type marked by majestic porticos at the entrance, a grand staircase, large halls decorated with massive decorations, and natural lighting. The architecture of such museums is dictated by the perception of a museum as a temple, where one must experience the sacred value of the exhibit presented. This is the way the Louvre Museum, the Prado, the Hermitage, the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts (Figures 1 and 2), and many other museums of the 18th and 19th centuries were built (Lysikova, 2004, p. 5-6). Museums founded during this period mainly grew out of the collections of rulers (the Louvre Museum, the Prado, the Hermitage) and private collections of

patrons (the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts). In this, museums play an educational role, shape and reproduce the state narrative, and become "civic laboratories" (Bennett, 2005).

In the second half of the 20th century, with the general democratization of culture, the role of museums changed, including their architectural design.

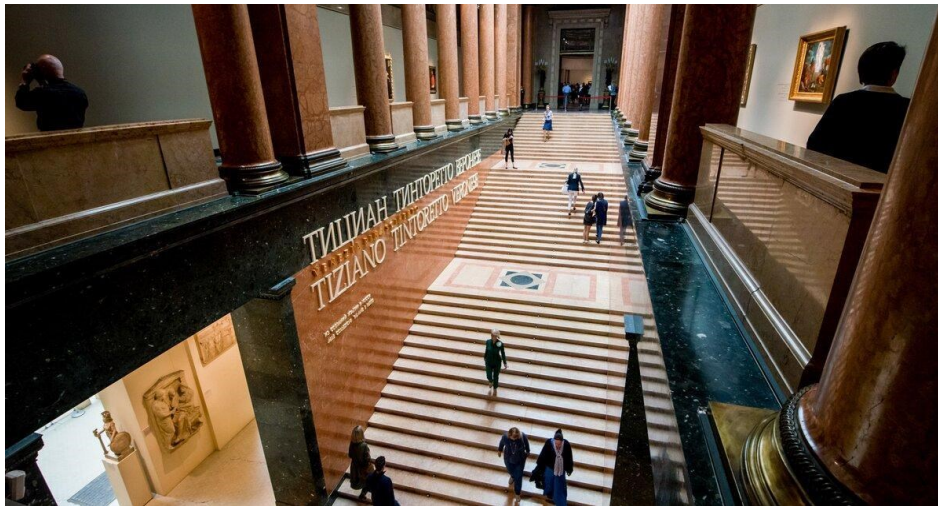
Contemporary fine arts museums offer visitors more freedom of movement through the halls along routes of their own choosing. In such museums the entire space is divided by light partitions with works of art on them (Figure 3). This organization of space embodies an idea new to traditional museums – that a museum is primarily a place that brings visitors together and makes a platform for the exchange of opinions, inspiration, and individual experience of each visitor, which they construct for themselves:

Space will only have a life when people enter it. So the important role architecture can play, and that space plays within that architecture, is to encourage an interaction between people, between people and the ideas being presented in the paintings and sculpture, and most importantly between people themselves. (Campbell, n.d.).

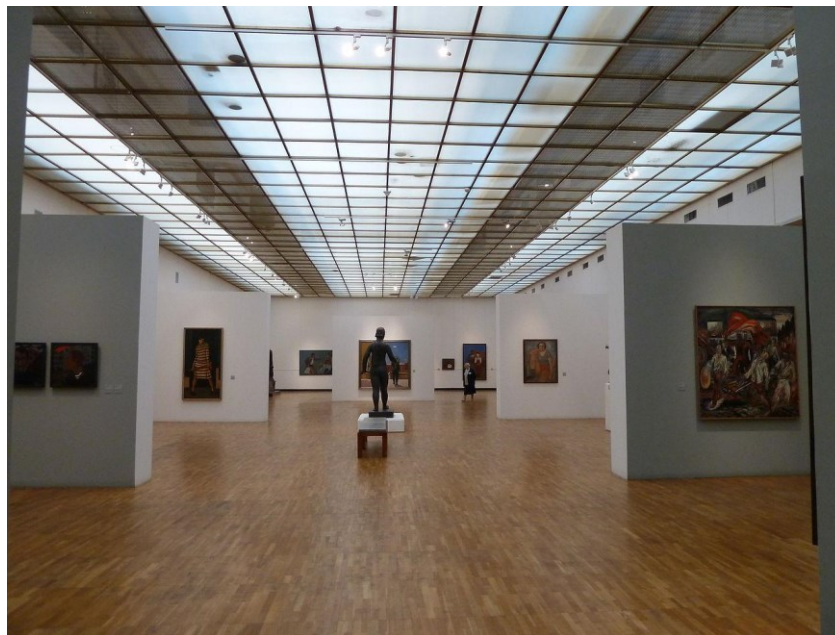
Many critics of this architecture note that the exposition of historical exhibits, especially fine art, is lost in the spaces of modern museums amid an alien environment, finding itself in a foreign space with which it cannot harmonize (Birkett, 2012; Preziosi, 2006; Shiner, 2007).



**Figure 1.** The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow



**Figure 2.** The grand staircase of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow

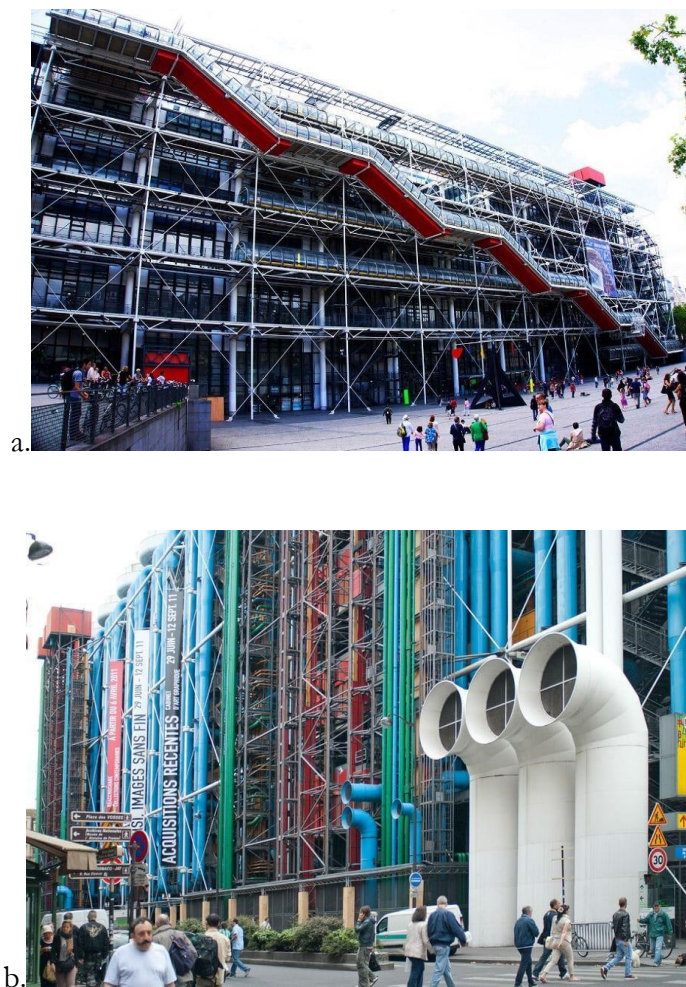


**Figure 3.** Halls of the New Tretyakov Gallery on Krymsky Val in Moscow

However, the needs of the audience, especially its younger part, continue to change and demand changes from the museum (Chugunova, 2012). This has led to a radical restructuring of the space planning solutions and, accordingly, of the general architecture of museum buildings in the direction of the commercialization of museum operations. In the pursuit of financial stability and, if possible, profit, museums no longer offer their visitors exhibits of self-value, but an entirely different kind of perception of their content (Museums Association, 2015). Museums are moving from the realm of the temple of art to the sphere of leisure and entertainment. This process of radical breakdown of museum architecture coincides in society with the formation of

a middle class with ever-increasing prosperity. Representatives of this large segment of the population do not have freedom of orientation in the sphere of artistic culture, which has turned the latter from an object of value into an object of no meaning for the worldview of these people. This largely stems from the fact that most middle-class people lack the training necessary to perceive classical art, and contemporary art, which is mostly conceptual, does not expect an emotional attitude toward it or an aesthetic one. Hence there forms the attitude: "It does not make sense to us, so we do not need it, it is better to spend our leisure time otherwise." As a result of such demand, museums have fundamentally reshaped the principles of communication with visitors, the structure of exhibition placement, and their interaction with the visitor with the help of new technical means. Thus, today's main trends in the development of museum architecture feature a combination of the museum's main function of educating with the function of entertaining. This shift of emphasis has prompted a change in the nature of the architecture both with regard to space-planning solutions and the appearance of music halls, conference rooms, restaurants and cafes, children's entertainment areas, etc. in close proximity to the exposition part of the museum. Entire educational centers with lectures and creative evenings and club areas are planned inside the museum. In this sense, the museum becomes more of a cultural center. Such a center is more democratic and accessible to all social groups, responding to their needs and encouraging them to become participants in universal museum action (Ando, 2002; International Council of Museums, n.d.-a). A museum is a place where life boils rather than one where a contemplative atmosphere is formed (Surikova, 2021; Turchin, 2009).

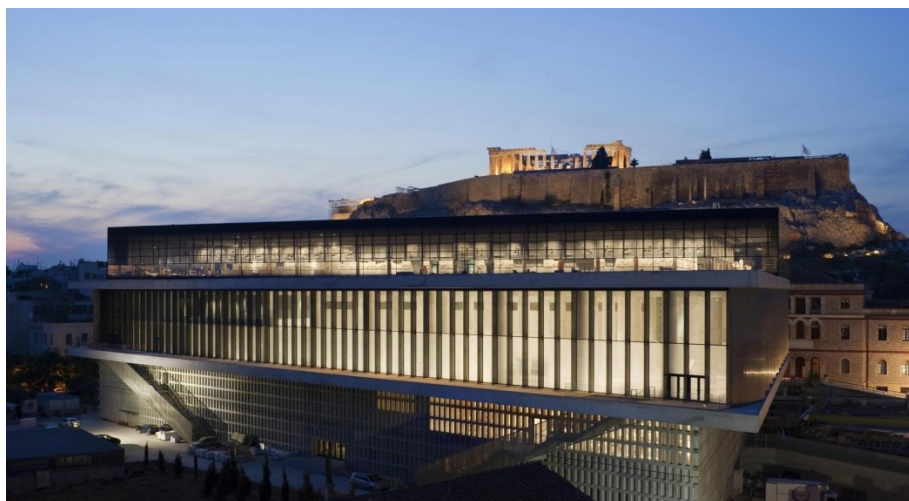
This trend is readily apparent from the example of the National Georges Pompidou Centre of Art and Culture in Paris (Figure 4). Through the glass walls, the internal structure of the building can be easily seen. The diagonally crossed escalators and all the utility lines, painted in different colors, show on the facade of the building. The overall architecture refers the viewer more to objects of industrial architecture, such as an oil refinery. Neither in its internal structure nor in the general appearance does the building suggest its main purpose as a place to keep works of art or books. There was no space inside for the display of artwork, so additional volumes had to be constructed to create wall surfaces for this purpose (Revzin, 2010). Aside from the Museum of Modern Art, the center houses a library, the Industrial Design Center, the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music, concert and exhibition halls, and several movie halls.



**Figure 4 a, b.** The National Georges Pompidou Centre of Art and Culture in Paris. Fragments of facades

However, there remain examples of solutions to museum complexes that do not deviate from the idea of enlightenment. Every effort is made to connect the inner content of the collection of exhibits with the environment they reflect, in which these exhibits are in perfect harmony. One such museum today is the Acropolis Museum (Figure 5). The grand museum building houses artifacts from the Acropolis itself and from excavations at the foot of the Acropolis. The building was designed by architect Bernard Tschumi. The museum is zoned, including research, storage, technical, and other spaces. Nevertheless, the exposition and the public spaces and their relationship and correlation remain the central part of the museum's space. The delicate positioning of the building itself at the foot of the Acropolis and its position parallel to the axis of the Parthenon speaks of the great respect for the monument and its great value to the world community. The Parthenon, as the symbol of Athens, remains central to the overall composition and is visible from any point in Athens. The museum building is windowed

to the maximum extent possible. This allows viewing the internal structure of the exposition with the exhibits in it from the outside as much as possible while bringing the exhibits closer to their natural archeological environment when viewed from inside the halls. The main facade is designed with a massive canopy that covers part of the archeological excavations (Figure 6). The main core of the museum is the multi-floor hall (Figure 7) with a glass floor with archeological excavations underneath, which reflects the main philosophy of the museum as a collection of archeological monuments of world significance and the possible visual interaction of the visitor with the process of their study. This area is called the Slopes of the Acropolis. Numerous stairs, elevators, and ramps, with all their functional necessity, given that the museum is located on a slope, give the interior space a certain dynamism of the modern world, characteristic of the present time. The hall with a vast number of sculptures is open through the glass walls to the outside world. Through them one can see the slopes of the Acropolis with a variety of buildings and archeological monuments, reminding of the natural and man-made environment in which they existed in antiquity (Figure 8). Thus, this example of the organization of the museum space and the overall architectural solution, as conceived by the author, preserves the main purpose of a museum as a temple of history and culture. This design applies modern approaches to the perception of a museum as a carrier of multilateral information about the monuments presented in the exposition and allows immersing the visitor not only in the historical context but also in the process of professional archeological excavations, conveying the deeper meaning of the stored and exhibited collection (Ermolenko, 2018).



**Figure 5.** The new Acropolis Museum





**Figure 6.** A portion of the excavation open for viewing under the canopy of the main entrance of the Acropolis Museum



**Figure 7.** Main two-story hall of the museum



**Figure 8.** The slopes of the Acropolis visible through the windowed museum hall walls

An important phenomenon in the development trends of museum architecture today is the creation of museum corporations. The most vivid representative of this approach could be the Guggenheim Corporation. It owns the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo (Arata Isozaki, 1992) (Figure 9), the Guggenheim Hermitage Museum in Las Vegas (Rem Koolhaas, 2001), and more. Today the corporation has museum buildings in New York, Venice, Bilbao, and Berlin and complexes under construction in Abu Dhabi and Vilnius. This corporation covers a wide range of diverse activities. Besides exhibiting, publishing, and educational activities, it includes souvenir production, hotel, tourist business, restaurant complexes, and production in the sphere of design.



**Figure 9.** Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, SoHo, Manhattan, New York City. Architect

Arata Isozaki

A new phenomenon in the architecture of museums is the reconstruction and adaptation of former industrial buildings for contemporary art museum exhibitions. This trend has been labeled as the deindustrialization of art. Factory buildings, power plants, gas holders, and even entire industrial zones are reused. A striking example of this approach is the reconstruction of a former power plant for the Tate Modern museum in London (Herzog & de Meuron, 2000) (Figure 10). The architect's work impressed the public not only with professionalism but with the unconventional architectural solution, which turned the industrial building into a convenient space for the exhibition of contemporary art. Such examples are growing in number, especially since technologically obsolete industrial sites can be found everywhere. In London, Battersea Station is being reconstructed for this purpose; in Liverpool and Manchester, entire former industrial neighborhoods are being renovated; a former power plant is now home to the White Cube Gallery.



**Figure 10.** Reconstructed power station in London housing a museum of modern art. Architects Herzog & de Meuron

Given these substantial changes in the organization of museums' operations and their perception by the public, the architectural image of museums, which currently experiences major transformations, gains particular importance. The departure from the castle and temple style required a new view of the museum object in the urban environment (Saimova, 2015). Buildings of a historical type were approached through the organization of museum zones with landscaped

grounds and restoration of the old buildings, as was done in Berlin or Vienna. Museum buildings in these cities are arranged around neighborhoods or historic islands. On the other hand, for example, in the case of the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, the architect Hans Hollein has blended the museum building into the existing development, taking advantage of the difference in levels of the construction site and not caring about how the building would be perceived from the point of reflection of its purpose. In other words, today a museum building can transform externally into an ordinary public building without marking its essence.

However, it is a great fortune for an architect to get an order for a museum building. That is why work with the image is almost always out of the foreground (Shipunova, 2009). With the first changes in society's attitude to museums and a significant drop in interest in traditional expositions, architects tried to compensate for this loss and raise this interest at the expense of a bold external appearance of the building itself. There appeared museums in the form of glass cube-shaped volumes, for instance, the Bregenz Kunsthau by Peter Zumthor. The appearance came to reflect a social, political, or cultural orientation. Projects by Daniel Libeskind, for instance, are striking examples of the embodiment of military content or the redefinition of human tragedy (Figure 11). Other ideas, like Frank Lloyd Wright's, involve the desire to create a new image of the museum building, reflecting the infinity of art in time and the never-ceasing perception of it by the visitor. This can be seen in the concrete ribbon of the facade pouring through the entire central volume, which is supported inside by a ramp.



**Figure 11.** The Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden. Architect Daniel Libeskind

However, architectural thought progressed further. There emerged such objects as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (Figure 12). With his object, the architect Frank Gehry posed the question: What should the architecture of museum buildings be? Should it be a striking stand-alone object or a receptacle, a decoration for exhibits (Zakharchenko, 2006)? Gehry answered this question by creating a prominent and striking architectural object in a gray city district. The museum has become a dominant feature of the urban environment, the center of interest for visitors, and the cultural center of the northern region of Spain with its industrial and port economy. The construction of this museum site gave rise to the term "the Bilbao effect".



**Figure 12.** The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Architect Frank Gehry

Finally, we should note the most advanced technical methods used by museums to attract visitors (UNESCO, 2021b). The flow of information that can now be enjoyed by the visitor has undoubtedly become immense. Films, interactive screens, multimedia technology, and many other technical tools have made it possible to expand the knowledge sector in each museum. Some museums have created an opportunity for visitors to interact with the characters of paintings or sculptures, and have even "brought paintings to life". A painting comes to life when a camera is pointed at it. Pages in a book can do the same. The question arises as to whether such special effects are truly necessary. Perhaps in children's museums, it is not only appropriate, but also necessary to create models for children to directly meet, touch, sit on, twist, and even communicate with. But the works of artists or sculptors have very different purposes. Each work carries a charge of the creative thought of the author, their artistic style, and finally

the philosophical context. When the comprehension of these aspects of artistic heritage is transformed into a game, the visitor is deprived of the opportunity to experience these aspects of the authors' work. Michelangelo's David, who can be greeted with a handshake, loses all the historical and mythological character of the hero who defeated the terrible Goliath. He becomes one of us, an ordinary man from the neighborhood. Of course, Michelangelo did not anticipate this perception of his work, standing in the background of a Renaissance palace with all the monumentality of a beautiful young hero.

An essential aspect in the process of creating museum buildings has been the use of the most progressive structures and technology both in the design of such buildings and in their construction. Digital technology has made it possible to realize the most bizarre forms to suit the imagination of architects, who now take full advantage of these possibilities, as exemplified by F. Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. The exceptionally complex curves of the outer wall of this building could be achieved both in the design and in its execution solely with the help of computer technology. An important factor in creating large unsupported interior spaces, freely flowing from one to another, is the use of modern structural solutions in the form of composite slabs, which can bridge significant spans without intermediate supports while significantly reducing the construction height of these structures compared to traditional large-span trusses and even structural coatings. All this makes it possible to bring the architecture of museums to a new, more modern level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The results of the study point to a dramatic change in the concepts of the museum both as an architectural work and as a social institution. Under the influence of dynamically changing culture and public demand, museums have acquired a new internal structure, more fluid and easily transformable. In most cases, museums become cultural centers and are often accents in the urban environments they transform. Museums are often branches of museum corporations, which place their museum objects all over the world. The interior space of exhibition halls is created as a unified space, easily flowing from one area to another, allowing the visitor to plan their own route of exploration. The equipment of museums includes high-tech devices and makes it possible to expand both the information field and the forms of communication with visitors. All these changes are connected, above all, with the commercialization of museum work, which turns a visit to a museum into an entertainment leisure activity. Museums are responding

by organizing their activities to the demands of consumer society, on the one hand, and becoming more democratic in attracting all segments of the population, on the other.

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