Awakening the Muse

A Museum for the Fisher Family Art Collection

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Abstract

This thesis is a proposal for a large contemporary art museum on the Presidio Parade Grounds in San Francisco, California. The site is small and historic, thus my solution was to build primarily underground. Through my exploration of designing a subterranean art museum I addressed the challenges of natural lighting, circulation, and curation. The following images document the result of my studies.
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The Museum

Site

The site for the museum is a block of land which sits on the southern end of the Presidio Parade Ground in San Francisco, California. The surrounding buildings are two and three storey brick constructions, part of an inactive military base. The site is small and cramped for a large contemporary art museum and the scale of the surrounding buildings is relatively small. My first instinct was to go underground. Building an underground museum allowed me to take a different approach to designing something that did not conflict with the scale of the surrounding buildings on the site. First and foremost building underground allowed me to explore unique ways of bringing light into the museum.

Canyon

The first act was to cut the ground in a way which shaped a quasi canyon. This canyon undulates back and forth and around on itself creating a circuit that opens up to the sky. The walls of the canyon are white concrete and monumental in scale, extending seventy feet into the ground and as far as thirty feet out of the ground. Along with undulating in and out, the walls also lean back and forth, holding back the weight of the earth. The canyon provides long and wide spaces for larger sculptures or installations and brings natural light into the bottom of the museum. The roof of the canyon is a glazed enclosure that allows the admittance of natural light while keeping out the elements and providing a suitable environment for the artwork. The canyon operates as both a circulation path and gallery space simultaneously. To reach the canyon floor, the visitor either takes elevators or travels down the underground path, visiting galleries along the way.

Path

As the visitor travels through the canyon, an administration light well and into the lobby of the museum. From the lobby the visitor can either go to the bookstore or to the vertical circulation core. From the vertical circulation core, the visitor can take a ramp across to the primary circulation path and the first galleries or take an elevator to lower galleries or storage. On the way down the path each gallery branches off to the right and on the left small apertures open up into the canyon. To leave, the visitor will return to the vertical circulation core and take and elevator back up to the lobby level, pass through the bookstore and leave the museum via a set of ramps which parallel the entry ramps.

Gallery

All the galleries are of different shapes and sizes. The shapes are a response to the shape of the canyon and a grid. The original grid was a series of forty foot by forty foot gallery spaces. The walls have separate hanging surfaces which sit several inches off of the concrete. Behind the side wall panels are electrical and utility services. The back walls of each gallery are operable and can be opened up into the service corridor.

Light Well

The light wells provide natural light to twenty of the thirty-two underground galleries and create a landscape above ground. The shape of each light well differs and depends on its location, the angle of the sun, and the depth of the gallery in the ground. The shapes of the light wells also can vary depending upon the desired experience of the visitor. Ten of the light wells, in the deepest galleries, are shaped similarly to the canyon walls, indicating to the visitor the concept of being underground and the weight of the earth being held back. Another ten galleries have series of light wells creating patterns both above and below ground. There is also a room with a light well that actually runs along the sides of the gallery only allowing natural light in along each wall creating the impression of a floating ceiling.

Administration Core

The center of the canyon circuit consists of three floors of administration space which is mostly hidden to the visitor except for the lobby and the bookstore. There are offices and studio spaces for the managers and curators of the museum to conduct business and restore art pieces. There are several large light wells which descend from ground level to the bottom floor of the administration spaces. These large light wells bring light into the underground offices and studios; they also provide an outdoor area accessible from the lowest level of the administration core.

Service Corridor

The service corridor is an underground U-shaped corridor which wraps the outside of the museum. Each gallery has an operable back wall which opens up into the service corridor. Artwork is delivered into a light well across the street from the museum and is lowered on an elevator into the service corridor. The crane is used to move work from one place to another inside the corridor. The art is stored and then when needed for a show, moved into the galleries. The art storage is opposite each gallery’s operable wall. There are bridges from the storage to the back of each gallery for ease of moving art pieces to the galleries. The bridges are removable for moving larger pieces of art with the gantry crane. The hardware for the HVAC, radiant flooring, electrical and monitoring systems for the galleries run inside the service corridor.
Section of Entry Walkway and Entry Plaza
Section of Entry Ramp, Entry Plaza, Service Corridor, Galleries, Path, Canyon, Administration and Lobby and Entry Plaza
Section of Canyon, Path, Galleries, Light Well, and Service Corridor
No winds up to straight.
Drawing of Inside Canyon View
Drawing of Inside Canyon View
Section Sketches of Canyon
Light Well Sketches
Section Drawing of Service Corridor and Operable Gallery Walls
Sketch of Canyon Walls and Light Wells Above Ground
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Gallery and Light Well Interior Rendering Showing Light Track Embedded in Ceiling
Photograph of Canyon Model
Model of Canyon, Gallery and Path Intersection
Further Reading
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