

# Physical and Virtual Experiences on Contemporary Museums: The Case of MIS Rio de Janeiro

Patrícia Martins

*Mackenzie Architecture and Urbanism*

*Faculty, São Paulo, Brazil*

## Abstract

Since the 1960's the "traditional" museum architecture has been challenged in having to cope with an ever growing number of virtual forms of art such as videos, projections, films, performances, happenings, documentaries and video art that completely changed the relationship between one's body and art: from an object/body/space fruition to the apprehension of a moving image and/or a moving body, that requires specific technical conditions of light, acoustics, projections and sets for interaction between performers and visitors. Nowadays, the Covid-19 pandemic and the need of social distancing affecting us since March 2020 has challenged museums and cultural institutions from all over the world to enable multiple virtual experiences of its buildings, collections and exhibitions, fact that calls for an urgent feedback on what museums are willing to stand for in a data informed virtual era that we're facing and what is architecture's role regarding it. Considering this context, this paper analyzes the MIS Rio de Janeiro by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, as a case study: a contemporary museum that presents a

bold spatial proposal to cope with virtual contents and experiences, implanted at the loaded cultural and historical Carioca landscape.

## Keywords

**Physical / Virtual Experience on Contemporary Museum.**

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Considering the long history of architecture, the museum typology devoted to the displaying of art and historical artifacts has been evolving through different spatial configurations that reflect the status of these cultural objects and their fruition according to each cultural economic context: the palaces transformed into museums like the Louvre in Paris, the lined up galleries of the neoclassic Altes Museum in Berlin, the first designed exhibition hall of the Secession Pavilion in Vienna, the adaptation of a commercial building at the origins of MoMA in New York, the modern free space of the Neue National Gallerie in Berlin, the postmodern walkscapes of the Stuttgart National Gallery, the programmatic mix

of Pompidou Center in Paris, and the spectacle of architecture's protagonism of Guggenheim Bilbao. All these different spatial propositions for museums and galleries were designed targeting excellency in experiences regarding art, historical objects and architecture that depend on the visitor's presence to achieve the best interaction with the cultural objects, being these conditions the fundamental aspects of a good architecture and a good exhibition design. Thus, it is fair to assume that "traditional" museum architecture and exhibition design could be considered the ones that depend on the actual presence of the visitor's body for the fruition of the works of art and historical artifacts, where architecture establishes connections and builds statements regarding cultural, social and economic contexts.

Since the 1960's this "traditional" condition has been challenged in having to cope with an ever-growing number of virtual forms of art such as videos, films, performances, happenings, documentaries and video art, that completely changed the relationship between one's body and the works of art inside the museum: from an object/body/space fruition to the apprehension of a moving image, or a moving body, that requires specific technical conditions of light, acoustics and image projections, and also, the different sets required by the

performer's body in relation to his/her audience inside museum spaces.

The immediate impact of this change happened first on art museum's infrastructure needing to upgrade electric and data systems to achieve the growing demand of connections required, followed by the need to consider the ever-growing number of "black boxes" cluttering architecture's spatial fluidity and layouts. There was also the need for more multifunctional spaces apt to receive different modes of interaction between artists and audience indoors in museums and galleries that were not initially designed for it. These new demands defied the "traditional" museums' spatial configuration, its functioning, programs and use.

Although still depending on the physical presence of the visitor, museums devoted to moving images, sound, and performances could be regarded as "nontraditional" once lacking the major presence of "objects" of art and the props that come alongside them, not to mention the disruption of the narrative circulations that art objects' exhibitions depend on. Since the first examples of museums devoted to the moving image<sup>1</sup> that have adapted old buildings and warehouses, closing windows and painting walls black to enable image projections, we have been seeing the appearance of new

<sup>1</sup> The first Moving Image Museum of USA appeared on 1988 as an adaptation of an old film studio (see: <http://www.movingimage.us/about/history>) and the MOMI London – Museum of Moving Image of London was built in 1984-88 "(...) under a fast-track 'design, manage and construct' contract and the timetable (...) sandwiched as it was above a car park and below the southern approach road to Waterloo Bridge". Retrieved from: <https://www.e-architect.co.uk/london/momi-london>, consulted on October 2020.

architectural projects dealing with the complex technology of moving image and interactive digital contents without failing to address the multiple tasks of a contemporary museum. The ZKM - Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe founded in 1989 is an important example of the museum typology's development trying to keep up and embrace contemporary art: "a cultural institution, a place that expands the original tasks of the museum: a house of all media and genres, a house of both spatial arts such as painting, photography and sculpture and time-based arts such as film, video, media art, music, dance, theater and performance, with the mission of continuing the classical arts into the digital age."<sup>2</sup>

The project also deals with the complexities of a listed, huge, industrial building of the early 20th century that adds an important layer of history to the contemporary cultural institution as a place worth visiting, besides its multiple contents.

All digital and virtual exhibitions, from simple wall projections to digital environments that need room for interactions have been challenging architecture to rethink spatial configurations accordingly, demanding not only sophisticated infrastructure of data, light and sound but quality spaces where people can move freely and safely,

getting the most of a real/virtual reality experience.

As an example, Atelier des Lumières<sup>3</sup> has occupied the old disused Chemin-Vert foundry to create a Digital Art Centre in Paris. After major renovation on infrastructure works, the Atelier des Lumières opened its doors to the public with interiors transformed into a single, huge, "black box" with wall washing high tech moving images that hide architecture's qualities or defects, reduced as it is to multiple projection surfaces and enough free room to the visitant's roaming inside it. The exterior of the "black box", however, remains as object of an attentive design: the support programs, the welcoming of its visitors, the connections with the street and the city.

Last year, the exhibition "Bjork Digital" has occupied the Museum of Image and Sound of São Paulo<sup>4</sup>: all interior walls were painted black and the exhibitions spaces were divided into "stations", as hubs, to host several types of digital interactive contents. (Ills.1,2,3,4) The awkwardness of bodies plugged into virtual realities devices was striking to the ones inside the museum, waiting their turn to connect. (Ills.5,6) The museum space was hopelessly transformed into a sequence of zones scattered through a big all black interior where there was nothing else to do but wait your turn to plug in. Even though devoted

<sup>2</sup> Official ZKM website available at: <https://zkm.de/en/the-zkm>, consulted on October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Atelier des Lumières website available at: <https://www.atelier-lumieres.com/en>, consulted on October 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Museum of Image and Sound of São Paulo website available at: <https://www.mis-sp.org.br/>.



III. 1. Exhibition “Bjork Digital” at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. External view of the museum. Retrieved from <https://viagemladob.com/wp-content/uploads/bjork-digital-mis-sp-ft-710x503.jpg>.



III. 2. Exhibition “Bjork Digital” at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. Internal view of the museum. Retrieved from <https://www.mis-sp.org.br/assets/site/img/mis-museu-da-imagem-e-do-som1728.jpg>.



III. 3. Exhibition “Bjork Digital” at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. Retrieved from <https://4.bp.blogspot.com/-uCBN4pcpmI/QXl-VSsO18il/AAAAAAAAACuQ/ZMCu0FQivzAqo3K1Wluoz9FK-XCR0cb6ACLcBGAs/s1600/bj%25C3%25B6rk-digital-brasil-5.png>

to Image and Sound content for years, the MIS SP and its “traditional spatial configuration” was not well prepared to a digital content. Digital interactive art and its modes of operation need architectural mediation to guide the visitor’s body both in and out virtual realities without neglecting the “real” condition of such artistic proposal: an activity enabled by a cultural institution and all its complementary programs – a place worth visiting regardless its current attractions. In both cases discussed above, digital contents must be considered by thorough architectonic designs devoted to the specificities of such programs without failing to attend to the museum’s core and all it stands for.

In times when the role of contemporary museums is being reviewed and questioned, this task stands as an urgent one. According to the International Committee of Museums (ICOM): “museums are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership



III. 4. Exhibition “Bjork Digital” at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. Retrieved from [https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-1x2HC8-ge5c/XL-MgH7Ta2I/AAAAAAAAActw/xjYoq5\\_3hNYmy5TGC3qiShyWg8AQypOxwCLcBGAs/s1600/bj%25C3%25B6rk-digital-brasil-2.png](https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-1x2HC8-ge5c/XL-MgH7Ta2I/AAAAAAAAActw/xjYoq5_3hNYmy5TGC3qiShyWg8AQypOxwCLcBGAs/s1600/bj%25C3%25B6rk-digital-brasil-2.png)



III. 5. Exhibition "Bjork Digital" at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. Retrieved from [https://imagens.som13.com/3051529/3051529/esta-confirmada-exposicao-da-bjork-aqui-no-brasil-no-mis-3\\_foto.jpg](https://imagens.som13.com/3051529/3051529/esta-confirmada-exposicao-da-bjork-aqui-no-brasil-no-mis-3_foto.jpg)



III. 6. Exhibition "Bjork Digital" at the Museum of Image and Sound SP, 2019. Internal view of the museum. Retrieved from [https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-bS-B\\_0d4dEU/XL-csurzp0I/AAAAAAAAACuc/Fae9l-4eBmkBDlayjD-6Q\\_0J5T2A94-vACLcBGAs/s1600/bj%25C3%25B6rk-digital-brasil-6.png](https://3.bp.blogspot.com/-bS-B_0d4dEU/XL-csurzp0I/AAAAAAAAACuc/Fae9l-4eBmkBDlayjD-6Q_0J5T2A94-vACLcBGAs/s1600/bj%25C3%25B6rk-digital-brasil-6.png)

with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." This proposal concerns and calls for a renewed role where museums and cultural institutions must build a strong link with its local and global community, assuming tasks that go beyond the displaying works of art and historical artifacts, but the building of

art and history's importance from within each community, be it tiny little villages on the countryside or huge metropolis, all tied together through the world wide web. From this perspective, the role of architecture and exhibition design gets an outstanding importance as the beacon attracting the community to actually meet under its roof and build together their own values and cultural statements, so they can be disseminated to the world. Therefore, the physical presence and the group recognition of the community inside the museum remain essential for the possibility of a fruitful virtual experience of "traditional" or "nontraditional" museums in contemporary contexts. It is my opinion, as an architect, all this is only going to be possible through a powerful architecture design.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the need of social distancing affecting us since March 2020 has challenged museums and cultural institutions from all over the world to enable multiple virtual experiences of its buildings, collections and exhibitions, posing an unavoidable question: what can and should remain virtual and what needs to come back to "normal". This fact calls for an urgent feedback on what museums are willing to stand for in a data informed virtual era that we're facing and what is architecture's role regarding it. Once museums allow virtual access to its exhibitions and contents, the physical presence of the visitor inside the museum gets a dramatic tone: why bother taking

one's time to go to the museum anyway? As a case study regarding the questions presented above, the Museum of Image and Sound of Rio de Janeiro presents an interesting proposal. It has gained new headquarters as the result of an international competition won by the New York architecture office Diller Scofidio+Renfro. It is an 8-story building located right on the famous Burle Marx Copacabana sidewalk, facing the sea. (Ill.7) According to the architects, “The promenade captures the key element of the beach—a space of the public in motion—on foot, bicycle and automobile. The building is conceived as an extension of the boulevard, stretched vertically into the



Ill. 7. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. External view Retrieved from <https://cdn.sanity.io/images/q2tdbkqz/productiongTIW3NZ5rjygzPFtIDN4z2xf-1375x1650.jpg?w=1000&fit=max&q=90>

museum. The “Vertical Boulevard” gestures toward inclusiveness: it gently traverses indoor and outdoor spaces and branches to make galleries, education programs, spaces of public leisure and entertainment.”<sup>5</sup> The project is totally committed to the cultural and physical Carioca way of life, proposing the continuity of Burle Marx’s sidewalk inside the building as a continuous walkthrough the facade up to the roof, an open-air theater. (Ill.8) The architectural promenade as proposed lead the public through a bottom up sequence of exhibitions and support programs enabled by generous steps that



Ill. 8. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Facade and main circulation. Retrieved from <https://cdn.sanity.io/images/q2tdbkqz/production/BGOUe0yhZlC7NRzo9NJCafhs-2200x4950.jpg?w=1500&fit=max>

<sup>5</sup> The passage was quoted from Diller Scofidio + Renfro official website. Retrieved from: <<https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects>> Consulted on September and October 2020.

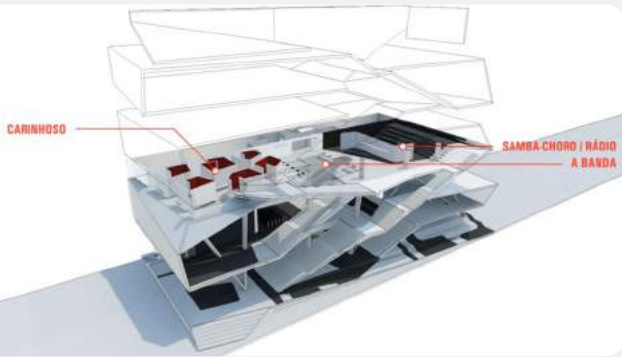
sews the facade, promoting an intense interaction between inside activities and the exterior landscape: the city, the beach, the sidewalk and the sea.<sup>6</sup>

The museography design by Daniella Thomas and Felipe Tassara has used many thematic rooms to show historical black

and white images and films, and also music, through projections and interactive stations throughout the building. (Ill.9)

The closed exhibition rooms are strategically located within the architectonic design, building up the circuit, using transparencies and suspended walls that, together with the complex spatial design, permits crossed views that superimposes different glimpses of different exhibitions, frequently reaching out the landscape outside through the facade's aluminum cobogós. (Ills.10,11) These spatial tools enhance the feeling of permanent awareness about the place one is in.

A simulated view of the "A Banda" exhibition (Ill.12), highlights the designs'

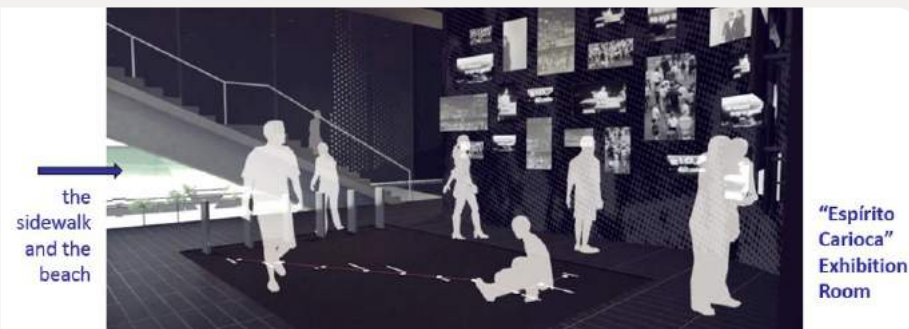


Ill. 9. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Museography by Daniella Thomas and Felipe Tassara. Retrieved from <https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects>



"Carmem Miranda" Exhibition Room

Ill. 10. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Museography by Daniella Thomas and Felipe Tassara: "Carmem Miranda" exhibition room. Retrieved from <https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects>

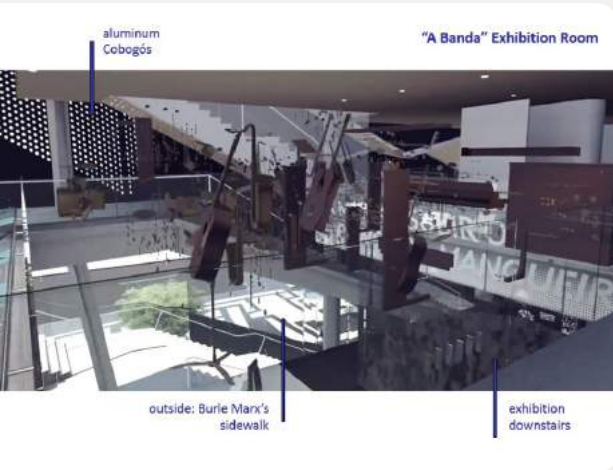


"Espírito Carioca" Exhibition Room

Ill. 11. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Museography by Daniella Thomas and Felipe Tassara: "Espírito Carioca" exhibition room. Retrieved from <https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects>

All the commentaries on the MIS Rio de Janeiro project were made possible through the material available at the Diller Scofidio + Renfro website: <https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects> Consulted on September and October 2020.

spatial richness, allowing simultaneous views of different exhibitions and architecture's features that promote a lively conversation between what is happening inside and outside the museum.



Ill. 12. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Museography by Daniella Thomas and Felipe Tassara: "A Banda" exhibition room. Retrieved from <https://dsrny.com/project/museum-of-image-and-sound?index=false&tags=cultural&section=projects>

To conclude, the Museum of Image and Sound of Rio de Janeiro offers us a valuable example of a contemporary museum that presents a bold statement: an architecture able to provide a state-of-the-art infrastructure for virtual and digital contents without neglecting the most important quality of a contemporary museum: to serve as a place open for all, where the community builds and fortifies its cultural values through collective experiences, and in so doing ensuring its own place in the global community.(Ill.13)



Ill. 13. MIS Rio de Janeiro by DS+R. Open air theater. Retrieved from <https://cdn.sanity.io/images/q21dbkqz/production/Ahmspez79hm3UP2oQrDqOMf-3000x2250.jpg?w=1000&fit=max&q=90>