732 – 0006

Inscriptions to the Sonneveld House Museum

MASTERTHESIS
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Abstract

3. RESEARCH EXPERIMENTS

4. FINAL DESIGN

ABSTRACT

The Graduation Project titled 732 – 0006, Inscriptions to the Sonneveld House Museum echoes the indexical nature of the archive of the Sonneveld House Museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. The thesis is an allegory to the incompleteness of the house museum's representation. This allegory creates elliptical moments within the narratives of emptiness that were found in the archive. Thus the archival space unfolds into the space of display rendering the invisible visible.

The typology of the house museum is historically rooted in the artificially constructed cabinet of curiosities and the period room. 732 – 0006 explores the factually flawed and fragmentary representation of the object of display – in this case the Sonneveld House Museum. Here, time, the BIHS foundation, the archive, the curator and the architect of this iconic building have constructed a subjective narrative of history that we encounter whenever we enter this time capsule.

Based on empirical and archival research 732 – 0006 deconstructs the pre-sent(ed) space of the Sonneveld House Museum and creates a new structure by rewriting found narratives, errors and voids. Addressing the meaning of the original, the copy, the real and the fake this project opens up a new dialectical space with multiple perspectives on the existing dominant representation.

My interest in the Sonneveld House Museum stems from my project the *Silent Waiter* that I have designed in the previous academic term (Winter 2014). Within my project I questioned the representation of the social history. I presented the Sonneveld House as a fragile structure that is solely in balance through the support of the domestic workers. The *Silent Waiter* was my first project based on archival research. The archive of the Sonneveld House Museum is part of the Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. Currently based in Rotterdam and fascinated by the space of the archive and the potential it holds, I saw a great opportunity to continue with my work.

The following thesis critically investigates the specific typology of the historic house museum based on the example of the Sonneveld House Museum in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

It was not until 1998 that the historic house museum has been acknowledged as a museum typology. As a result the International Committee for Historic House Museums [DemHist] has been established by the International Council of Museums [ICOM] in order to investigate that newly recognized research area in museology.

'Cultural Institutions have always been a crucial part of the educational system but have become more and more popular in our post-fordist society where knowledge is the central point of our economy. Nowadays museums resemble mega-institutions, tourist destinations and places of consumption that act as symbols for state power.' (Borja-Villel, n.d.)

Along these lines it seems like a logical consequence that the interest in house museums with their intimate scale and specific and individual character has grown. The deputy member of ICOM, Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas, claims that the space of the house museum has the power to evoke the past and capture the visitor emotionally through the representation of the lost history of individuals (Gorgas, 2001). Thus house museums are often used as a political tool to create an illusion of a specific 'cultural and historical identity' (ibid.).

Therefore my thesis aims to contribute to the discourse of
institutional critique in regard to this recently acknowledged museum
typology by analysing and deconstructing its strong representational power.
I claim that it is rooted in the hybrid character of the house museum that leads
to the experience of double blindness [which is a term that I have thought of
during this investigation (Chapter 2.2)] when it comes to recognizing
manipulations in the representation.

Thus in the case of the Sonneveld House I am revealing the
authoritative image that is created through the reconstruction of history from
a dominant white perspective that creates a cultural myth around the iconic
modernist building and a political illusion of its social history. Moreover the 1:1
reconstruction of an original space is based on incomplete archival material,
which renders the allegedly symbolic house into an 'educated guess' (Molenaar,
2015).

Consequently, I am proposing a new approach to the representation of the
historical interior through entering and unfolding the archival space and
bringing it into the space of display. I am challenging and critiquing the
conventions of viewing architectural and social history by appropriating their
representational modes. Thus my methodology [see Chapter 1.3] is based on
doubling, displacing and rewriting the archival material to propose a dialogue
between the existent and non-existent space. Therefore, I am creating fake
inscriptions and exposing false archival material. Those inscriptions materialize
in a new spatial structure that is elliptically moving between the domestic and
institutional sphere. That space is deliberately opaque to mirror the structure
of the archive. My aim is to create a new point of departure for the visitor
where s/he has to engage actively in the perception of the space to be able to
distinguish between the notions of real and fake, domesticity and cultural
institution. With those moments of implicit and explicit dialogue 'between
display, viewing and viewed' I aim to raise awareness of the flawed cultural
institution and to deconstruct the prevalent image of authenticity and truth in
museums (Helguera, 2010).

The house museum is a specific interior and museological typology. It is a place where private and public, exterior and interior, domesticity and institution meet. Those two entities are constantly acting on each other. What kind of interior space emerges from such opposites and how does it affect the visitor?

The house museum seems to have a particular power to not only 'evoke history' but to 'put the visitor into direct contact with it' (Pinna, 2002). This specificity of the historical place pretends to be 'self-evident' and authentic (Van Mensch, 2011). How can the interior architect reveal the discontinuity in its apparent meaning?

Since the advent of the critical movement of New Museology the museum is understood as a medium of communication. How does the house museum communicate with the visitor? How does the visitor read the space?
The construction of the house museum is based on several entities such as time, the archive, collective memory and the curator. They all create a singular narrative of the representation of history. Based on the information theory by Claude Shannon and on the communication model by Stuart Hall these entities were investigated in regard to glitches [Chapter 2.4] in the construction of history. How can those glitches be made visible?

Can those found mistakes and voids be rewritten into a new structure of display and lead to multiple readings of the represented history?
Finally, the representation of history in cultural institutions is part of the historiographical and art historical discourse. Can interior architecture contribute to that discourse of representation, historiography and art history?

The first part of my thesis traces the origins of the house museum and deconstructs its phenomenology. The established arguments are rendered visible on the basis of the Sonneveld House Museum.

The house museum is a specific interior and museological typology – 'a hybrid space, one both private and public' (Furján, 2011). Regarding the fairly short history of the house museum as a typology there is no official definition of historic house museums. The DemHist Committee understands it as its primary tasks to develop such a definition and classification of historic house museums. Nevertheless in 1997 there was a first attempt to create an official classification that resulted in the following preliminary definition:

'Royal Palaces, houses dedicated to illustrious men, houses created by artist, houses dedicated to a style or an epoch, houses of collectors, historic houses as a setting for contents, family houses, houses with specific socio-cultural identify'. (Pavoni, Selvafolta, 1997)

It is interesting to point out, that even though there is no official definition of what a historic house museum is, Pamela Jerome, an architect and architectural conservator defined how it should be:

'The space must be authentic in terms of truly replicating and representing the way it once stood in its original from and appear to be untouched and left in time.'(Jerome, 2008)

She continues with declaring three key points of how this authenticity can be achieved:

1   'Proof of identity must be presented and certified by a credible individual.
2   The attributes of the object or person must then be compared to the existing knowledge about it.
3   Documentation and credentials must then be used to support it and thus declare if it is authentic.' (Jerome, 2008)

Contrary to this definition I will now trace the development of the house museum to proof that it is not authentic but an opaque fiction thereby I will specifically focus on the interior and its artificial and flawed construction. The house museum is rooted in the beginnings of museum culture namely in the cabinet of curiosities but also in the later originated period room. Nevertheless I will start my analysis with the predecessor of the cabinet of curiosities, the studiolo, as it already suggests a space that is defined by illusion. The studiolo emerged during the Italian Renaissance and it was a private room for study, intellectual discourse and secret affairs (Guerrieri, 2002). The walls were usually decorated with wood inlays that used the technique of the trompe l'oeil, French for 'deception of the eye', to create an illusion of depth and three-dimensionality (Alexander, Alexander, 2008) (Collins, 2015). The walls imitated cabinets and drawers as if to deceive the visitor into seeing real objects and furniture (Figure 1).

In the 16th and 17th this space evolved into the studio and then into the cabinet (Savas, 1994). Even though the cabinet is nowadays understood as a piece of furniture it originally was an interior space. A decisive change occurred throughout this development in regard to the purpose of those spaces. The cabinet of curiosities was no longer an exclusively private room such as its predecessor, the studiolo, but occasionally it turned into a representational tool of power, knowledge and status. In this space the collector presented his vision of the world - that he usually gained on expeditions around the world into - as an 'indoor, microscopic, reproduction' of it, thus creating a 'theatre of the world' (Fiorani, 1995). These collections did not follow an internal logic but were eclectic accumulation of 'natural wonders (naturalia), scientific instruments (scientifica), precious art works (artificialia), ethnography (exotica) and inexplicable, miraculous objects (mirabilia)' (Figure 2) (Moore, 2013).

Through the reconstruction of his worldview the collector 'symbolically [conveyed his] control over the world' and presented knowledge that was not accessible to others (ibid.). Therefore collections were often based on a mix of fact and fiction. They displayed mythical artefacts such as e.g. the horn of a unicorn that in fact was the tusk of a narwhal's or giant bones that in fact came from mammoths or elephants.

Figure 1: Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio. 15th Century

Figure 2: Ole Worm's Cabinet of Curiosities. 1655

Cabinets of curiosities are nowadays seen as the origin of the museum but I would like to stress the fact that especially the house museum is rooted in this typology. Houses became the host of private collections and were made accessible to a larger audience thus creating a hybrid interior comparable to the house museum were the public and private realm fuse (Pavoni, 2001).

With the advent of the first art museum in 1793, the Museum of Republic at the Louvre, the Museum was declared as 'public entity' and the path was laid for the 'museum as building type' (Ameri, 2004). Which meant that the museums to come were supposed to create a neutral backdrop for the displaced art and create a space purely for representation. This new space of the museum opened up the discussion whether the museum as a space without context, a non-space, is able to represent artwork that was created in a specific place and in a specific context or if the artwork should not be exhibited in its original place. During the mid 19th Century this discussion gave rise to the debate about the importance of the house as a tool for representation. As a result museums started to exhibit art in a domestic setting (Pavoni, 2001). This was the origin of the period room that represented a certain style in an atmosphere of a home to make the visitor better understand what was exhibited (Figure 3).

Period rooms were original interiors that were stripped out of houses and reconstructed in museums. Although they were originals their construction was modified to fit the space of the museum. Additional to the structural change the content of the room was manipulated and enriched with objects and artworks to achieve a symbolic representation of a specific style and 'further the illusion of reality' (Olivarez, 2014). Therefore period rooms were the first imitations in a museum - an artificial space solely constructed to transport knowledge [for a better understanding of authenticity and imitation in the art museum, please see Chapter 2.3].

Both typologies, the cabinet of curiosities and the period room show similarities to the house museum. Always being a hybrid between private and public using 'interior design [...] as a tool of (self)-representation' and veiling reality through their artificial construction, such as the manipulated interior

space of the period room or the singular perspective of the collector in the cabinet of curiosities (Günhan, 2011). Thus they transport an authoritative, often illusionistic and mythical image of the world [cabinet of curiosities] or of a certain style [period room]. Both notions are combined in the house museum that creates a cultural myth and political illusions [elaborated in Chapter 2.5].

Figure 3: Beuningkammer. 1744. Foto: Amsterdam Museum