

## Making Public Space: Museo Maya de América

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Some of the most unique and well-used public spaces today are owned and operated by museums, and in some instances these spaces have become emblematic of the institutions themselves. It is difficult to imagine the Centre Georges Pompidou without its sloped plaza or the Tate Modern without the Turbine Hall. Neither of these spaces were part of their original competition briefs; rather, they were proposed by the architects Renzo Piano/Richard Rogers and Herzog & de Meuron, respectively.

Clients and all the many stakeholders involved in commissioning a large building each have their own priorities and self-interests, but often, and without malice, the public interest is underrepresented in this process. With this shortcoming in mind, architects must seek out opportunities to provide spaces that are open and accessible to all within their projects, whether they are specifically tasked to do so or not. At times this can be a struggle—a fight against security, budgets, politics, and social structures—all play a role in determining a client's willingness or ability to be a patron of public space. I would nevertheless suggest that architects should adopt a Hippocratic-like oath to promote the interests of the people and create opportunities

for generous public space wherever possible.

### Museo Maya de América

Maximizing public space is a conscious strategy encouraged in all projects by Harry Guggler Studio, where I worked as a Project Director. To illustrate this, I will outline our attempts to carve out as much space for the public as possible in the design of the Museo Maya de América (MUMA), in Guatemala City, from the siting and urban connections of the building to its internal organization, exhibition strategy, and vertical circulation.

The MUMA, designed by Harry Guggler Studio in collaboration with over,under, will showcase the collection of La Ruta Maya, a foundation that repatriates Maya artifacts plundered from Guatemala over the centuries. In addition, the museum will house Guatemala's national collection and the personal collection of La Ruta Maya's founder, Fernando Paiz.

The ancient Maya left behind not only artifacts, but also a vast array of incredibly rich and intricate monuments such as the temples in Tikal and the Palace of the Governor in Uxmal. Inspired by these structures, though without quoting them directly, the design of the museum presents a large, almost

scaleless, abstract form to the city. The building consists of two main elements: an open plinth at ground-level and a solid volume hovering above. The plinth is a vast public space to be approached from all sides. The space is activated by the museum functions that do not require a ticket for entry: information, ticketing, café, gift shop, amphitheater, auditorium, and children's workshops. The upper volume consists of two floors of gallery spaces and a large rooftop sculpture garden.



Approach toward Museo Maya de América through park. Courtesy of Harry Guggen Studio and over, under.

### Site

The site is adjacent to other cultural institutions and lies at the edge of what will soon become Guatemala City's most significant public park. Our first design gesture was to begin a dialogue with the city to remove the road that separates the museum from this green space. Siting the MUMA within the park allows the space of the museum to become a seamless extension of the landscape. This makes the museum's aspiration as a public institution explicit while simultaneously making it seem less formal and imposing.

On the other side of the site we encouraged the client to sponsor a pedestrian bridge to cross an arterial road and connect the museum with a Maya craft market and a zoo to the north. Because it will be the only place to cross the road in the vicinity, the museum will become a shortcut between the zoo, the market, the neighboring cultural institutions, and the park. Maximizing pedestrian movement through the site will turn the museum plinth into a lively and activated space and this will help ensure it remains free and open to the public at large.

### Interior

Historical forms of Maya public spaces inspired the interior of the MUMA. We looked at plans of ancient settlements, such as Kawinal, and drew from their organization of freestanding houses facing off across small plazas. In the design of the museum the houses became enclosed exhibition galleries and the plazas became the open circulation spaces between them. Gallery entrances are concentrated to face certain plazas, distinguishing these as more lively and juxtaposing them with other, more intimate plazas tucked away. This allows the museum, just like a city, to provide a hierarchy of spaces, hosting a gradient of activities from louder and more interactive to more singular and introverted.

The walls of the plazas will be lined with cabinets so that the entire collection of artifacts can be stored on view for the public. This arrangement allows the physical condition of all works to be passively surveyed against damage and theft, a problem in traditional art storage warehouses. More importantly, unlike other museums which can only display the few pieces for which there is space in the galleries at any particular time, the open display of the vaults of the MUMA will make the full breadth of the collection visually accessible. This is particularly poignant for the national collection since it will be always visible to the general public who own it.



### Circulation

The roof of the museum is planned as a massive public space mirroring the ground plane. It should be free and accessible to all as a sculpture garden to explore after touring the galleries, but also for those who cannot afford the price of museum admission.

The roof is accessed from a central circulation space inspired by cenotes—sinkholes that played an important role in Maya life, both as a source of water and as a spiritual space of connection to the underworld. Starting on the roof, MUMA's cenote erodes the center of the museum to connect the gallery levels to the public plinth and to the underground parking. People can move through the museum, passing storage cabinets along the way with parts of the collection on view, and catch glimpses into the restoration studios, offices, and the archive, offering the public an impression of what goes on behind the scenes to make the museum function.

Keeping the cenote free and accessible to the public so people can travel through the museum to the roof without necessarily buying a ticket would require multiple ticketing checkpoints. Decentralized ticketing organizations are becoming more common and the client agreed to this for some time, but ultimately insisted on a single admission point at the ground floor. We were able to compromise, however, and include a second checkpoint on the roof and a

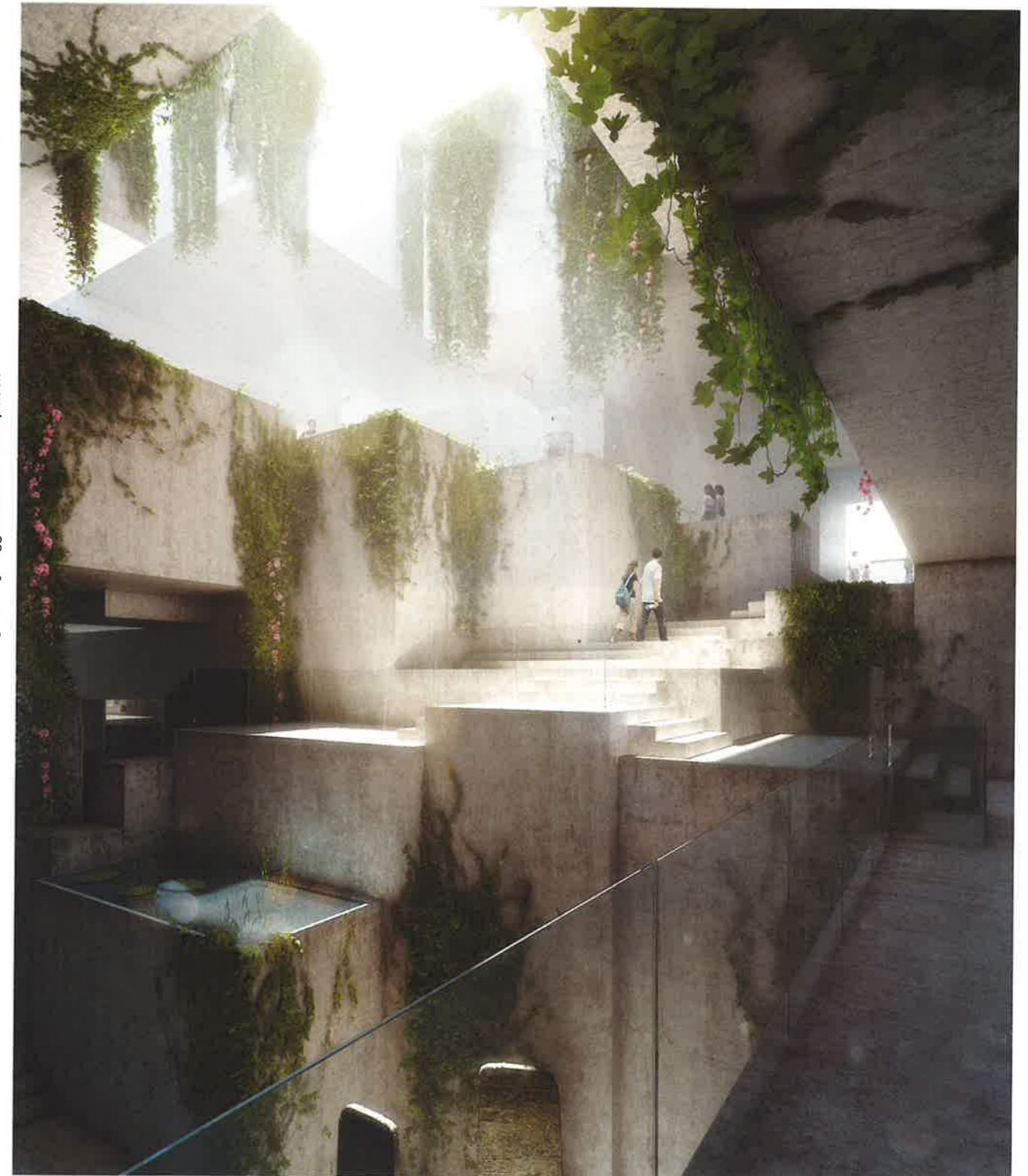
separate, more modest vertical circulation route passing through the storage on display to allow the public free access to the rooftop sculpture garden.

While a single circulation system open to everyone would have been a stronger gesture, the creation of this second route has two advantages. First, it creates a loop: one can buy a ticket and visit the museum, finish on the roof, and then descend back to ground along a different route. More importantly, however, as permanent infrastructure it has a better chance of remaining intact as a public space. Had we been successful in convincing the client to keep the cenote public, physically there would be nothing to dissuade him from changing his mind down the road, taking away the public amenity of the roof garden and making it accessible to patrons alone.

### Conclusion

Central to Harry Guggler's practice is the belief that it is an essential role of an architect to propose, promote, and defend public space. The Museo Maya de América is a good example of this drive to use every major design decision as an opportunity to advocate on the public's behalf. Ultimately, much of this work may go unnoticed if it has been done well. While the open ground plane and accessible roof will be legible enough, the factors that precipitate their success should not be apparent. No one will remember the road we asked the city to erase, or notice the pedestrian bridge we convinced the client to pay for. Similarly, the spaces where the public can peek into the inner workings of the museum should feel natural and it will seem as a matter-of-fact that the entire collection be on full public view and not hidden in a warehouse.

While all these architectural moves may go happily unremarked upon, in the end they will be the very elements that enable the public to directly engage and access the institution. Ideally, this will help lead the public to take ownership of the museum, making it a truly meaningful public space for all.



Cenote circulation. Courtesy of Harry Guggler Studio and over, under.