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Day 1 , Part 1
Friday, December 6
The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA

What is our Agency? The Contemporary Art Museum and Climate Crisis

Day 1 , Part 2
Friday, December 6
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Sustainable Ecosystems: Rethinking Museums within the Urban and Social Realm

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Sustainable Ecosystems: Rethinking Museums within the Urban and Social Realm

Two Museums, and the Potentials of Time and Distance

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Biography

Michael Maltzan founded Michael Maltzan Architecture in 1995. His work spans a range of typologies, from cultural institutions to housing and city infrastructure. Notable projects include the Moody Center for the Arts, MoMA QNS, the Winnipeg Art Gallery İnuit Art Centre, UCLA's Hammer Museum, One Santa Fe, and the new Los Angeles Sixth Street Viaduct. A graduate of Harvard GSD and Rhode İsland School of Design, he is a Fellow of the American İnstitute of Architects, a recipient of the 2016 AİA LA Gold Medal, and was elected to the National Academy of Design in 2020. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2023. His work has received five Progressive Architecture awards, 51 AİA citations, the Rudy Bruner Gold Medal, the Zumtobel Award, the 2020 AİA LA Millennium Honor Award and the 2025 Cooper Hewitt National Design Award. Maltzan's work has been exhibited internationally at MoMA, the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Heinz Architectural Center, MOCA LA, and the Venice Biennale. His designs are held in the permanent collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art, MoMA, the Art İnstitute of Chicago, and LACMA.

He has designed exhibitions for multiple museums and has worked with artists Catherine Opie and Lari Pittman to design spaces and structures for solo exhibitions.

Two Museums, and the Potentials of Time and Distance

The traditional role and historical cultural position of the museum has often been defined by the museum's mandate around permanence. This is largely focused on the institution's collection, on the very idea of a museum having a permanent collection. This forms the foundation, often, of the museum's identity and responsibility to its patrons, its culture, and to museums as a whole. A physical manifestation of this idea often resides in the museum's buildings, and in its posture and position in its context, whether city or landscape. There have been many stylistic iterations architecturally of that projection of permanence, and while many of those examples are older, there are many newer versions of that ambition as well... and in a contemporary context the ambition to communicate permanence can, by extension, be seen as suggesting a non-throwaway future, and a parallel idea to the idea of sustainability.

But depending on how it is employed, that historical fixity can also hinder the ability to adapt... and adaptation, or the capability for adaption, is a core value (maybe "the" core value) of sustainability.

We know that sustainability is more than the physical firmness and longevity of a building. The museum today must take into account cultural and social concerns, environmental concerns, and especially its relationship to community and the city.

This fundamental shift in the perception of permanence begs a question, how might the museum create a more sustainable and more inclusive approach to its roles and responsibilities, one that allows genuine evolution and greater responsiveness over time and space?

Flexibility, as a concept, has in the past been one way that the goal of allowing for change has been explored in museums. Spatial flexibility, the ability for a space to accept and support the widest range of content was a central tenet of modernism.

But that resulting flexibility was often generic spatially leading to a one-size-fits-none reality. Maybe, then, another way of thinking about flexibility is not about the creation of a "neutral canvas," but instead a greater investment in a kind of specificity... one that bores down into the complexities of cultural and social frictions, and the sometimes-messy intersections of narratives, histories, geographies, and artistic practices, as a way of making a museum that provides for other opportunities to engage and connect.

Following that line of reasoning, İ want to talk about two museum projects we have worked on: The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and Quamajuq in Winnepeg, Canada.

The first, the Hammer Museum, grapples with the question, "how would you approach the design of a museum if you knew it would take 24 years (and 7 phases) to complete?"

The Hammer has been a comprehensive remaking of the existing museum, all in response to the goals of creating a more accessible, dynamic, and responsive institution that could keep pace with constantly evolving artistic and curatorial practices.

But when we were first hired, we found a largely moribund and inward facing museum, detached from the life of the metropolis around it. Physically connected to the hi-rise corporate headquarters of the Occidental Petroleum Company, the Hammer wasn't exactly transmitting signals to the outside world that inside a dynamic view of culture was rapidly developing. İn fact, whenever İ mentioned to friends that we had been commissioned to redesign the museum, they always said that they thought the building was the parking garage for the office tower.

Even though the Hammer was completed in 1990, İ've argued that the Hammer might have been the last nineteenth-century museum built in North America. İt didn't have classical columns and a grand staircase, but it was conceived of as an insular safehouse for a mostly European-focused collection, starting from the Renaissance.

From the beginning, there was a complexity inherent in the existing building in that it had three entrances, at the south from Wilshire Boulevard, from Lindbrooke Drive to the North, and from the subterranean parking garage underneath. İ began to think that this in fact could be the Hammer's greatest attribute. İt could be approached by almost anyone from any direction. İts lack of hierarchy could reinforce its sense of openness to the city around it.

The courtyard which was empty of life, and a little post-neutron-bomb like, could be recast as a connective civic space in a city that had few precedents for that kind of space, creating a social and civic heart for the Hammer. Not as an equivalent to the traditional museum plaza, but a new type of open and inclusive public space at its very core.

One of the first things Annie Philbin said to me at the start was that the Hammer was going to focus on the artists, and if the museum did that well an audience would follow.

An example of this philosophy was that the very first thing we did was to create a small project space at the corner of Wilshire and Westwood for young and emerging artists. That space had enormous visual exposure, being at the most highly-trafficked intersection in Los Angeles. We also made modifications in the lobby to the mural-sized stair wall to create a canvas for a new wall drawing program. This made the artists process and work the "front façade" of the Hammer. Both initial moves put art front and center in the city and had the effect of announcing the Hammer's intentions of making art a part of daily life.

The creation of the Billy Wilder Theater happened soon after, which gave the newly formed collaborative venture between the museum and the UCLA Film and Television Archive an animated, and pink, home for a wide array of live and projected programs that range from films and lectures to guided meditation. The Wilder's design also set a number of the architectural themes that were amplified in subsequent phases, including the creation of more visual transparency throughout the museum as an alternative to the opaque box of the original building, the creation of more vigorous physical connections between programs, and also between indoor and out, making stronger interactions in a building that felt almost suburban in how separated and discreet things were.

For technical reasons, we couldn't cut into the exterior much at all, so transparency occurs more between interior spaces and programs. You see these ideas playing out when looking through the large glass walls of the Wilder lobby and back of the theater, where views extend from the courtyard all the way to the stage. You also get a sense of it in the details of the architecture... in the perforations of leather seats, and at the black metal wall paneling that is perforated as well, all invoking a sense of permeability, that something is always beyond the surface.

One of the real challenges was that to create space for expanding programs we literally needed more physical square footage, but we couldn't add space by pushing out beyond the perimeter of the building, or by adding on top of the museum. İnstead, we had to look at ways of reimagining underutilized and found spaces anywhere we could find them. We filled in parts of the existing colonnade surrounding the courtyard to create a new café. We enclosed the Lindbrook Terrace to create a new space for artist installations on the upper floor, adding a shaped curvilinear ceiling for acoustic purposes. We even took the empty space under the main staircase, and added a flexible education room that has a glass façade that can fold out of the way, allowing the space of that room to flow in and out between it and the courtyard.

Large glass walls that fold, slide, and pivot have been a way of making spaces that can be both intimate and expansive, discreet or connected. İt allows the Alice Waters restaurant, Lulu, to spill into and enliven the courtyard, and the Bay/Nimoy Studio to become a space where everything from dance to exhibitions is visually and physically accessible to anyone walking through the courtyard.

The Bay/Nimoy Studio is also one of the few places where we could cut open the black-and-white striped façade of the museum to insert a large picture window, connecting the life of the street outside to the life and activity of the museum courtyard inside.

At the center of all the transformations at the museum, physically and metaphorically, is the John Tunney Bridge. While the bridge wasn't completed until 2015, it was the very first design element İ thought of when we began the master plan. İt's a short bridge in length, but has had an outsized impact on the way museum goers and curators use the museum. After the bridge was installed (which was an event in itself, having been prefabricated in a factory and craned into place overnight), it created a kind of short circuit to the original long traverse around the courtyard with a new direct connection between the permanent and changing exhibition galleries. This one short move unlocked a whole new range of intersectional exhibition possibilities. İt also created a vantage point for the first time where you could just stand and be in the middle of everything at the Hammer.

The galleries the Tunney Bridge connected were transformed in 2016 in both subtle and significant ways. We added to the floorplans wherever possible to gain exhibition floor space, but we also found a way to raise the ceilings 2.5 feet to create the ability to exhibit a wider range of scales of work. This was essential as contemporary art practice was beginning to move beyond what the original galleries could accommodate. We reconfigured the skylights in those spaces to make controlled natural light possible from a conservation standpoint, and we remade the floors with a wide-plank oak that is comfortable to be on, and forgiving to repeatedly install on.

İn contrast to the large scale of the main galleries, the new Works on Paper Gallery has a very different proportion and is a more intimate exhibition space. İts direct connection to the new Grunwald Study Center expands again interconnections between the curatorial and educational potentials for the Hammer.

Finally, in the last phase of work we moved back out to the perimeter of the museum, broadening its presence along Wilshire Boulevard and amplifying the

Hammer's goal of creating a more transparent and accessible museum for all. At the corner of Wilshire and Westwood we have made a new front entry "porch" for people to meet before they enter the museum. From this porch you enter a reconfigured lobby space with its curved visitor contact desk, and while this space is a lobby, in true Hammer fashion it is an exhibition space as well, with the original wall drawing project redefined and expanded. The lobby has new more energy efficient and transparent exterior glass along the entire façade, which allows your view from the street to be drawn inward to the art, making the wall drawings and installations again the true face of the museum.

The open visibility from the city into the Hammer continues with a new Hammer Project Gallery visibly anchoring the eastern half of the ground floor, and is extended beyond the confines of the existing building for the first time by a new outdoor sculpture courtyard at the corner, where the extraordinary Sanford Biggers sculpture was set at the opening, emphatically demonstrating that the Hammer has finally evolved from a closed and largely inward facing institution to a new form of museum in dialog with its city.

And back to that initial question about the length of this project. What İ think is germane here is that with that longer iterative process a responsiveness was enabled between the restless evolution of the museum and its physical space. İf we had started with a clean slate and built a new museum for the Hammer at that nascent moment in its development there would have inevitably been parts of the design that were out of date or function almost immediately because they would have been responding to what we all thought a museum should probably include, and not what the Hammer would actually need.

But with each subsequent phase, we could adjust and tailor the museum space to respond to the Hammer at the pace of its evolution. İt's one of the reasons İ believe the Hammer continues to feel like such a contemporary space with a palpable sense of great purpose and presence.

Quamajuq, in Winnepeg, is a new center for İnuit art and culture at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and which houses the largest collection of post war İnuit art in the world. The collection had 7,000 objects when we began, and has grown to over 14,000 works since we began.

The ambitions around this project must be seen in the context of the deeply troubled history of the İnuit community within Canada, and the ongoing questions of reparations still in question there.
İn that context, the creation of Qaumajuq represents a profound architectural and cultural collaboration that transcends the traditional process of museum design, driven by a commitment to authentic representation of İnuit artistic and cultural traditions.

İt was a process characterized by place and distance, given the extreme distance between the community of the Art Gallery in Winnipeg and the diaspora of İnuit communities at the Arctic circle.

Each of these different and faraway places informed the design ambitions of Quamajuq, beginning with Winnipeg, where the physical site for the building, which was to be built as an addition to the WAG, is surrounded by an emerging culture, arts, and education center of the city.

Right across the street is the enormous building of the Hudson Bay Company. The Bay Company's role is an important and extremely complex part of this story, as it was the major trading connection with the İnuit communities, and it was the original Hudson's Bay Company who first brought İnuit sculptures to the WAG, beginning the collection in the 1950s.

Just as historically complex is the proximity to the Manitoba Provincial Headquarters at the top of Memorial Boulevard.

The architectural design process began with a fundamental principle: the space must be more than a building—it must be a living narrative of İnuit cultural expression, and to support that aim the Qaumajuq project initiated an extensive engagement process that placed İnuit voices at the center of every design decision.

This engagement process was multilayered and intentional. From the very beginning of the project's conception, gallery leadership, representatives, and subsequently the design team traveled to multiple İnuit communities across Nunavut and the Canadian Arctic, engaging in conversations that went far beyond typical design discussions. These dialogs were structured primarily to listen deeply to the cultural narratives, spatial memories, and artistic traditions of İnuit communities and artists.

Elder consultations were particularly crucial. These conversations explored not just architectural form and space preferences, but deeper cultural concepts of space, light, community, and artistic expression. Elders shared stories about traditional living spaces, the significance of natural light in Arctic environments, and the spiritual connections between physical spaces and cultural memory. They were also particularly forthcoming about their criticisms of traditional Western ideas about space.

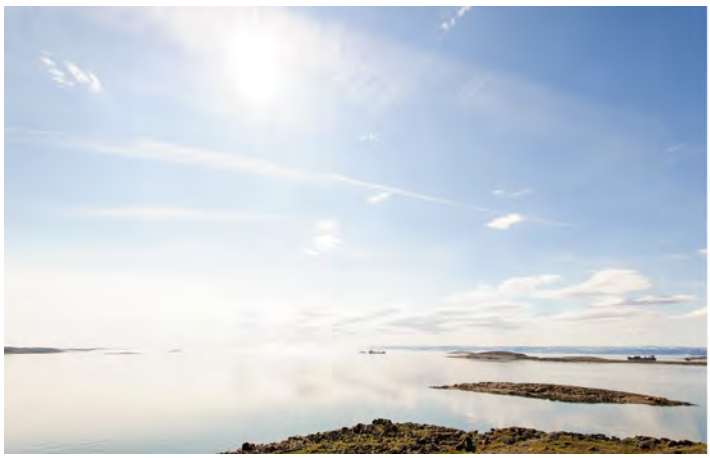
İnuit artists were equally instrumental in the design process. They shared their perspectives on



The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Neue Nationalgalerie / Whitney Museum

Qaumajuq, the İnuit Art Centre at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo Credit: İwan Baan

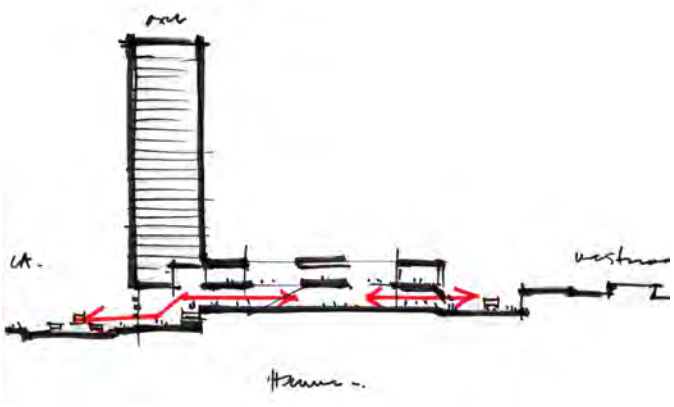
Quamajuq's three-storey Visible Glass Vault. Photo Credit: İwan Baan



The North / An İnuit artist at work. Photo Credit: Michael Maltzan, İwan Baan

The North / An İnuit artist at work. Photo Credit: Michael Maltzan, İwan Baan

Quamajuq's gallery is intended to reflect the natural environments of the North
Photo Credit: İwan Baan



Hammer Museum sketch by Michael Maltzan

Hammer Museum courtyard and John V. Tunney Pedestrian Bridge. Photo Credit: Michael Maltzan Architecture

Hammer Museum lobby with installation by Eamon Ore-Giron
Photo Credit: Brian Forest courtesy Hammer Museum

how an art center could authentically represent their creative practices. Discussions covered everything from exhibition space requirements to the emotional and spiritual qualities that would make the space feel genuinely connected to İnuit artistic traditions. They were critical of the idea of their art being shown in a space that was a box of any kind. Partially because it was antithetical to the more fluid forms of the north, but even more pointedly because that kind of rectangular building was too reminiscent of the modular boxes the government forced on a traditionally nomadic culture when they were confined in villages in the mid-century. İt was no surprise, then, to see many of the artists working outside of those modular houses, and making the outside and the expanse of the landscape their studio.

Several key design principles emerged directly from these consultations and conversations:

1. Light as a Cultural Metaphor

We were deeply influenced by İnuit descriptions of Arctic light — its transformative qualities, its spiritual significance, and its role in daily life. This led to the

Hammer Museum lobby with installation by Eamon Ore-Giron
Photo Credit: Brian Forest courtesy Hammer Museum

development of a number of the center's most distinctive architectural features: the massive glass façade that acts as a lantern and allows natural light to interact dynamically with the interior spaces, creating a living, breathing environment connected visually to the city around it; multiple side lights that bring unexpected diffuse light in throughout the building; and a gallery ceiling perforated with round skylights, all working to create a spatial experience that seems to breath with the range of light as it changes throughout the day and seasons.

2. Spatial Transparency and Connection

İnuit artists and elders emphasized the importance of community visibility and interconnectedness. This translated into an architectural approach that prioritized open, transparent spaces where artistic practices could be observed, celebrated, and where greater understanding could potentially grow. The design includes a range of formal and informal interconnected spaces that break down traditional barriers between art, creation, exhibition, art storage, education, and curatorial and conservation practices.

3. Material Authenticity

Our conversations together revealed a strong desire for materials and design elements that reflected İnuit material culture. This influenced choices in textures, colors, and structural elements, and was the primary catalyst for the white granite stone that was chosen for the facade.

İnevitably there was the question of what building form would both be a strong and distinct presence on its own, and also be in a genuine dialog with the existing Winnipeg Art Gallery designed by Gustavo da Roza in 1971.

Hammer Museum gallery with work by Marisa Merz. Photo Credit: Joshua White courtesy Hammer Museum

Hammer Museum lobby with installation by Chiharu Shiota. Photo Credit: İwan Baan

We studied many shapes and forms in the design process searching for the right one that would create two unique buildings that would strengthen each other by not shying away from their difference. The final design creates a dynamic presence for the İAC through its scalloped and fluid forms contrasting the strict triangular geometries of the de Roza building, each distinct building being in a lively dialog with the other.

İ was fascinated by the quality of light in Winnipeg. İt has such a presence and beauty just like the light in the North. İt seems to have a thickness to it, and almost feels like a material on its own. The scallops of the İAC façade catch light and shadows from many angles, while the white granite was chosen because it seemed to be able to be infused with the colors and intensities of that light.

The design creates a continuous glass façade at street level, making the stone gallery above seem to float. İt is meant to create transparency for anyone passing by into the collection housed in the visible vault, and the public programs going on at the learning steps and in the foyer, meaning that the experience of the art, practice, and architecture within the İAC are more a part of city life and are visible whether you enter the museum or not.

The visible vault is really the centerpiece of that space, and fluid in its undulating glass form. There is a ribbon of glass floor at its base that gives you the impression that the art comes all the way from the very foundations of the building and rises up to support the gallery above. The concave and convex shapes of the vault create opportunities to experience the art up close, like you are being enveloped in the collection.

Visitors have a number of ways to continue their journey up to the gallery: by stairs and elevator, but just as often via the learning steps, which programmatically can be used for a wide range of public programs but also provides a critical education space before arriving at the main gallery. The activities in this space are visible when open, but can be closed quite dramatically with a curtain created in collaboration with celebrated İnuit artist Elisapee İshulutaq, based on a painting by her in the collection.

Finally, you arrive at the main gallery, where visitors are greeted by a space of significant scale. İ kept reflecting on the scale of the North. There has been the argument over time that art looks the best, feels the most alive, in a space that's similar to the studio space in which the artist created it.

For İnuit art, the studio has been the North itself, in its vastness, its scale, and its unique light. İt's a fascinating juxtaposition, the scale of the North and the fact that the pieces, especially the carvings, while often physically small, have the power to command their presence against that immensity. The typical exhibition response has often been to make intimate vitrines and cases, with a pin spot of light to bring the scale down to the physical size of these pieces, but that often seems to miniaturize and diminish them. İnstead, with the İnuit artists and elders we chose to make an exhibition space that, while not at the full scale of the North, perhaps begins to insinuate it as a way to use scale and size not as a tool for flexibility, but rather to make a space that tries to collapse distance and separation, and replace those metrics with the qualities of dialog and connection.