

# Building and Managing Different Concepts of Contemporary Art Museums

**Gabriele Troilo**  
ASK - Università Bocconi  
and SDA Bocconi Business School

In the last few years a number of new museums of contemporary art spread all over Europe. This phenomenon indicates not only a renewed interest towards such a form of art, but it shows that contemporary art is considered more and more a relevant cultural, social, political and business issue by a number of different constituencies. National and local authorities see contemporary art museums as a means able to qualify the image of regions, areas and cities, with the clear intention to build touristic attractions. Big and small companies consider the association with contemporary art a profitable investment to build and differentiate the image of their brands and products, and funding or sponsoring contemporary art museums an effective communication tool to achieve this objective. Arts institutions and art galleries see strong relationships with those museums as a powerful way to promote the artists they work with, in order to achieve relevance and visibility. All these constituencies, then, act in a society whose postmodern features make contemporary art a particularly rich territory which feeds other ones: the advertising world, providing professionals with creative and innovative ideas; the world of goods in general, allowing companies to differentiate their value propositions and consumers to enrich the symbolic and aesthetic experience of their daily life; the media world, providing it with continually fascinating news to be delivered to their audiences.

Contemporary art museums, thus, have to deal with a new and critical issue: they need to differentiate each other in order to meet the expectations of so many and diverse constituencies.

Most museum managers try to figure out a solution at the very beginning of the lives of their institutions, defining a concept for the museum able to build a very strong and differentiating image in the minds of the constituencies they are interested in, or, redefining the concept in case the institution goes through a period of change, restoration or renewing.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the different concepts that can be designed for a contemporary art museum, and the key institutional and managerial issues connected to each of them.

To achieve this objective a desk analysis of the Western European contemporary art museums has been carried out. Going through documentary data (institutional brochures, annual reports, websites) a map of those ones born or completely renewed in the last 15 years has been drawn, describing features like size, facilities, location, presence of permanent collections, types of collections, main activities, organizational structure and so forth. The desk analysis has been preliminary to an exploratory multiple case research, which has studied six museums: Baltic Flour Mills (Gateshead, UK), Museums Quarter (Wien), Kiasma (Helsinki), Musée d'Art Contemporaine (Lyon), Magasins (Grenoble, France), Fondazione Re Reabaudengo (Torino, Italy).

Data have been gathered through in depth interviews with key informants (Museum Directors, Curators, Marketing Directors, Financial Officers etc.). The number of interviews varied from three to nine, and each interview lasted from two to four hours. For each case also documentary data have been analysed: brochures, annuals reports, websites, press releases.

Results show six different museum concepts that give life to different institutional, cultural, organizational, managerial and financial orientations.

1. *The art factory*. It is a concept characterized by a strong emphasis on artistic and cultural production and education. The main goal of such a museum is to foster the cultural growth of the area where it is located, trying to connect the artistic resources of the area with the interest of people living in the same area. The main activities are: artist-in-residence programmes; educational laboratories; archives and libraries; publishing.

2. *The showcase*. The idea behind this concept is to offer a huge number of various artistic and cultural experiences to a very wide audience. The main goal is to attract many different segments of people with a good balance of cultural and commercial objectives. There is a big emphasis given to the turnover of temporary events, in order to create a reason for different audiences to come and visit regularly.

3. *The living room*. The concept here is to create “The” place for contemporary art in a city. The museum becomes the place where contemporary art is produced, exhibited, debated, experienced, experimented, learned. It offers different kinds of artistic and cultural activities (permanent collections, temporary exhibitions, seminars, educational laboratories etc.) with the aim to make contemporary art and culture a part of the daily life of citizens.

4. *The artists’ museum*. It is the museum for contemporary art experts. It is the museum where artists produce, collectors can get in touch with young artists to buy their works, arts students can be trained. The goal is to contribute to the development of the world of art, with an expert viewpoint. The main activities are: artists-in-residence programmes, temporary exhibitions, permanent collections, education and professional training.

5. *The experts’ art exhibition centre*. The goal of such a museum is to promote young artists and curators to be prepared for the arts world. A huge attention is given to education and training, where the museum is the place where they can experiment their talents and abilities, and where they can be in touch with experts, professionals of the arts world.

6. *The multifunctional cultural centre*. It is basically an evolution of the traditional “kunsthalle”. It is very much devoted to the exhibition of artistic works but it is open to the different forms of art: visual arts, performing arts, music, movies, and so forth. The main goal is to build a place where different audiences can find a differentiated offer for different cultural tastes. It has a strong link with the city and institutional relationships are the main resources to leverage on.