

FOCAL POINT

FOCAL POINTS AID IN ORIENTATION, PROVIDE INTERNAL PREVIEWS AND MOTIVATE THE VISITORS' PROGRESSION THROUGH THE MUSEUM.

ISSUES:

Monochromatic and exhaustive displays, even-looking and undifferentiated paths, and poor spatial orientation lead to object satiation and museum fatigue, and to problems with orientation and way-finding.

Focal points can provide one design tool to deal with these issues which center on the topics of paths, displays and activities.

The worst path is one with no end and no special events along the way. Whether monotonous or chaotic with no underlying logic, the main issue is the visitor's inability to establish a personal hierarchy of significance. Focal points aid in making decisions about which path to take, which exhibit to view. As importantly, they aid in recall: what did I see?

A criticism of many children's museums is their apparent lack of a coherent conceptual organization or connection between one exhibit and the next. Although the Exploratorium's fleamarket of interactive exhibits has proven to be very successful, the complex programs and the varying characteristics of the population served by many museums eschew this solution.

Wandering from one seemingly unrelated exhibit to another, or even worse, from one wing to another without an opportunity to make connections or conclusions reduces the potential to see the museum visit as a unified experience.

QUALITIES & CHARACTERISTICS:

Focal points can be visual and conceptual. They can punctuate, be points of reference in the museum landscape, and provide goals for progression. They can be objects, major events, near and far views, or a special place. Yet seen from below, an enticing overlook can be the object of a journey.

Whether they be symbols for a theme, a decision point along a path, or a gathering place, their success as a focal point depends upon their ability to be imaged and described simply. What they stand for must be understood, meaningful, and memorable. In many ways, focal points are interior landmarks and can serve as internal previews for adjoining displays.

APPROACHES FOR DESIGN:

A focal point is more than a bust in a niche. The successful ones weave together a variety of attributes.

1. A PROMINENT LOCATION:

At the largest scale, a central organizing space, the geographical center of the symmetrical plan can be the main strategy for orientation and wayfinding. The rotunda of a classical plan is a major crossroads and a great opportunity for a large focal point. Meaningful placement in the traditional sense is the center as the statues in plazas of Europe establish reference points. An eccentric location is more dynamic.

2. A MAJOR "EVENT":

The Chicago Museum of Science and Industry has converted its huge, classical central space into a mix of events. Within that space the coal mine serves as a clear focal point: it has physical presence -- tall and massive -- it is unique, and the event it houses is conceptually powerful.

3. NEAR AND FAR VIEWS:

Contrasts in viewing distance provide visual relief. A focal point at the end of a path provides a goal within reach. Those along the way punctuate,

providing pacing. They can double as the figurehead, or a prime example of the beginning of an exhibit cluster -- an abstract guide, an internal preview. The concentric organization of the exhibit areas in the Corning Museum is a series of graduated galleries ranging from displays for the general viewers to those of interest to researchers. The series is divided into twelve chronological eras. Announcing each era along the innermost path are twelve masterpiece columnar displays containing an exquisite example from the related exhibit.

An outdoor extension can include a special vista such as the Capitol Building of the United States viewed from the end of the "street" at the Air and Space Museum. Repetitive views of the same prominent focal point is a strong device for spatial orientation.

Focal points and retreats are highly compatible.

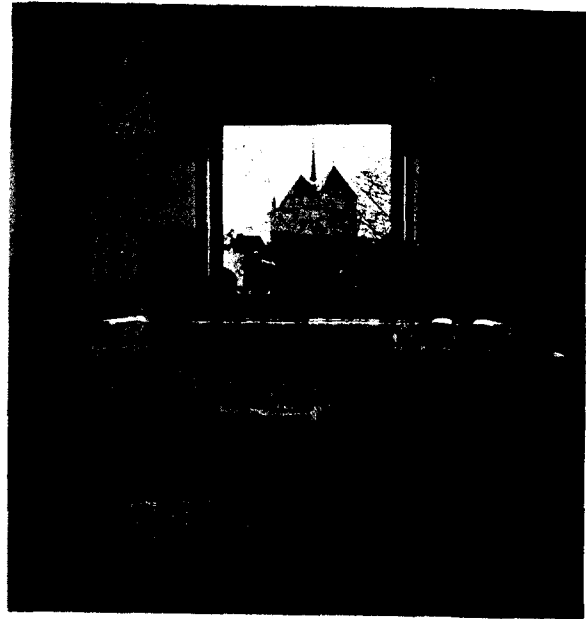
A given one such as the apse of the Monchengladbach cathedral provided Hollein with a framed view in a natural setting for a restaurant retreat. I. M. Pei created his own for the restaurants along the underground connection between the east and west galleries of the National Art Galleries. An external sculpture and fountain is an internal focal point as much event as object. People climb around.

The Louisiana Museum uses a sequence of landscapes as focal points along the path in a restful yet rich relationship of indoor to outdoor to path.

EXAMPLES:

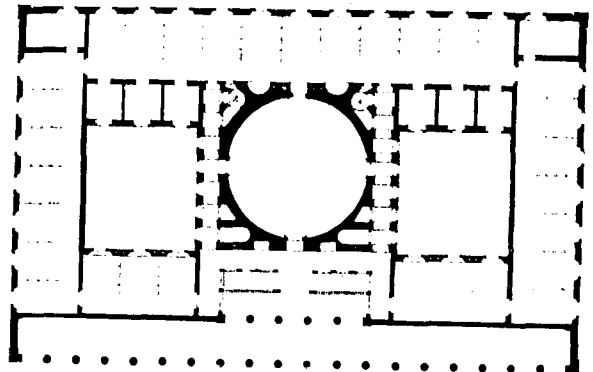
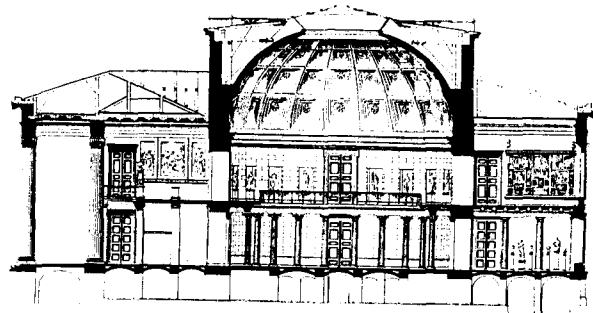
Municipal museum
Abteiberg-Monchengladbach,
West Germany
Hans Hollein 1981-1982

A special retreat in the museum
restaurant provides a framed view
of the greatest treasure of the
community -- the cathedral.



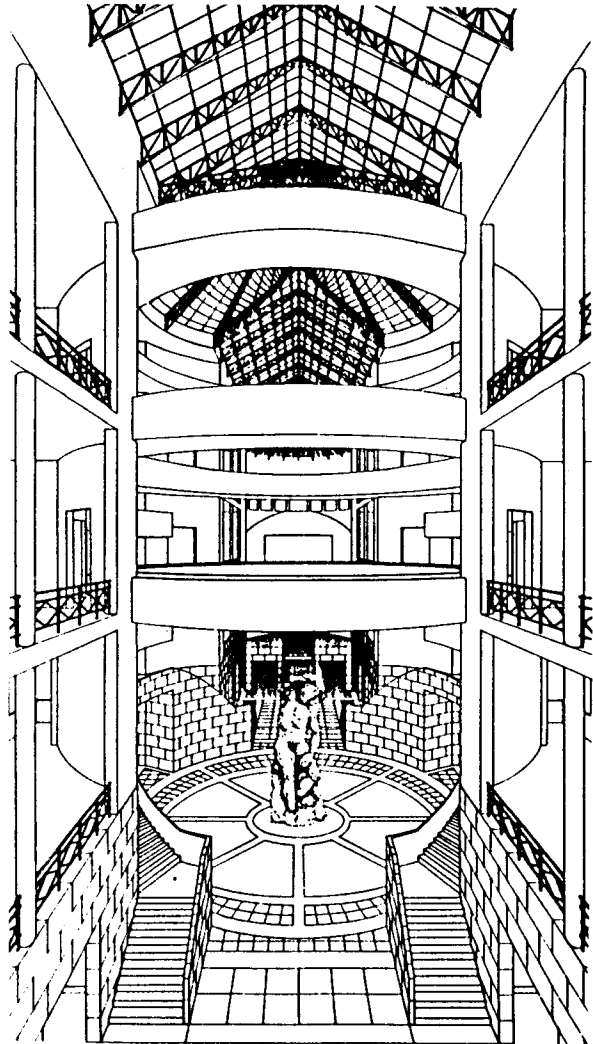
Altes Museum Berlin
K. F. Schinkel 1823-30

The classical rotunda is the most
dominant place in the museum. It
is centrally located, at
intersection of major paths, and
enhanced by a sky-lit circular
dome.



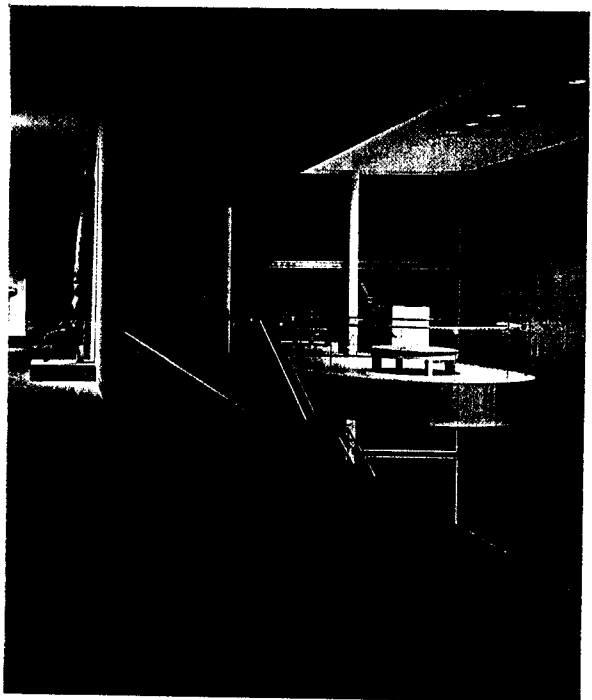
The Museum for Modern Art Vienna
Michael Hofstatler 1984

An object as a focal point -- a piece of sculpture -- is reinforced and "amplified" by a multi-story atrium/internal street that overlooks the central grand space.



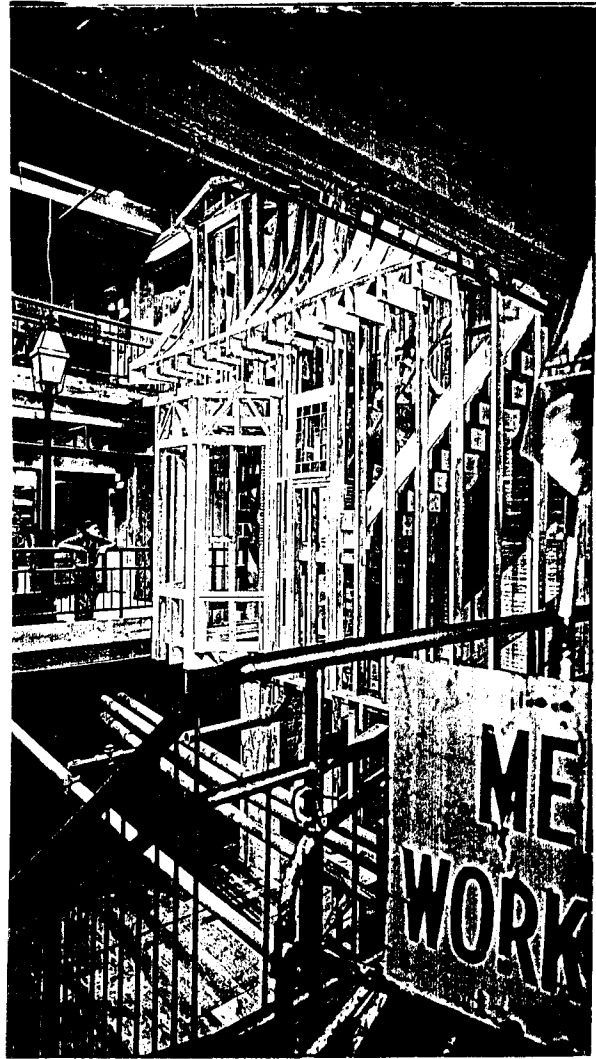
Dallas Museum of Art
Edward Larrabee Barnes 1984

The pool of light highlighting the balcony over the entry is an enticing goal and a promising retreat.



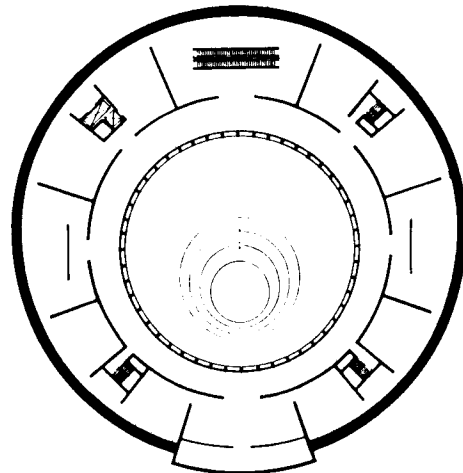
City Slice
Boston Children's Museum

A multi-storied vertical space accommodates the slice through a Victorian house from rooftop to basement. The display creates an atrium which connects the three levels of the museum. Although the "event" is not centrally located, it serves as an important internal focal point for orientation.



Hirshorn Museum Washington, D.C.
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill 1974

An outdoor fountain serves as a visual focal point, visible from any point on the circular route. The asymmetry of the fountain helps orientation in an otherwise almost perfectly symmetrical plan.



RELATED PRINCIPLES:

- * A LANDMARK
- * A PREVIEW
- * OUTDOOR EXTENSION
- * RETREAT
- * POOLS OF LIGHT