

Botta to Snøhetta; Cultural Changes between the 1990s and 2010s

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San Francisco has long been perceived as the final frontier. The city is formed as a collective of people who embrace any conceivable first mover advantage. From the gold-rush of the 1840's, to the Dot-Com bubble of the 1990s, the city is defined by its people; people who are willing to move into the unknown, in pursuit of new financial victory. San Francisco also legacy for being on the forefront of cultural change, as embodied in both the hippie presence at Haight and the gay community in the Castro.

In a city defined by rapid change, few sites bear witness to this evolution as much as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). Mario Botta built the first SFMOMA on 3rd Street in 1995. In 2016, a new edition, built by the firm Snøhetta, was opened on the same site. While the buildings share the same location and purpose, they couldn't be more different. The Botta building was large, dense and decidedly present. The Snøhetta, on the other hand, is light and wavy, elevating above its neighbors yet remarkably easy to miss. These buildings hold with them the tale of two cities, with an old, still developing cultural hotspot countering an overdeveloped anchor for global internet tech companies. The buildings' stark contrast is a testament to these changes, not only of the street but to the people who walk them. The decision to replace Botta's communal plazas and hierarchical structure with the Snøhetta design reflects the museum's efforts to increase revenue as San Francisco's culture shifts towards individualism.

Both Botta and Snøhetta pride themselves in creating buildings which address man's needs. With the same focus, it shocking they produce such contrasting designs. The contrast can be explained through the difference not only between the residents of San Francisco but between the strategies employed to determine those needs. Botta both determined and addressed man's needs himself, while Snøhetta embraced a more collective process. Botta referenced a single philosophy when determining man's needs, and addressed those needs in each building regardless of location. When it came to designing, Botta managed the entire process, ensuring his signature was on every sketch. To contrast, Snøhetta responded directly to the various "prototypes" of visitors at the SFMOMA, conducted workshops with the public to determine needs, and interpreted and implemented these needs within a large group.

When building, Botta directly addresses man's needs. In an interview with Livio Dimitriu, Botta asserts that his buildings are "an architecture which is measured by the yardstick of man's needs, and thus it becomes "cultured"."¹ While this assertion suggests each commission is uniquely tailored to the humans who occupy it, this is only partially accurate. When seeking to understand man's needs, Botta often cites the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Botta's

¹ Architecture and Morality, 124.

source for determining man's needs does not change based on location. This means that either his buildings do not address culture, or that culture is shared among a global society, and the differences between cities are irrelevant. The use of a single reference to man's needs emphasizes the common human condition.

Snøhetta takes an entirely different approach in determining man's needs. When designing the SFMOMA, lead architect Chris Dykers created many "prototypes", such as "the seventh-grade student, the art lover, the staff member," and envisioned their experiences with the new design.² Snøhetta also worked within a large interdisciplinary team to develop models.³ In this approach the firm does not work to satisfy every "prototypes" needs, but "does change the way we push and pull the clay in our minds."⁴

This difference in approach has everything to do with the change in the culture of the time. The Snøhetta practice is praised for embracing populism, the acceptance of the diverse population a building services. In the context of an art museum, this takes even greater importance. Art museums were historically reserved for the upper class. Only recently have museum curators and designers worked to invite those lacking a formal art education inside. This departure from traditional cultural elitism is revealed in the physical design. The new SFMOMA offers an entire floor of public galleries. Providing high-quality art to the general public at no cost works to undo the legacy of cultural elitism and welcome more diverse visitors.

Critics, on the other hand, would call this user testing understanding what will propel a certain person to complete revenue generating activity. The revenue-generating activities, in this case, are visiting the museum, making on-site purchases, and promoting the museum online. It is important to break your users into various prototypes, in order to ensure that you are "converting" as many of them as possible, as quickly as possible. Technologists and venture capitalists who prefer to maintain their sense of compassion refer to this as being "sticky", an illusion to a fly on a trap. The more direct simply say user testing allows you to "build a better trap."

The museum's reliance on user testing displays its ambitious revenue targets, and more importantly, the new culture of San Francisco. The largest employers in San Francisco are international tech firms. The "Big Five" tech firms, Amazon, Google, Apple, Microsoft and Facebook, all rely heavily on individualized consumer experience. The highly productive capitalist endeavors of this day and age rely on the exploitation of people, not natural resources,

² Pogrebin, 1.

³ What is a Museum Now?, 16.

⁴ What is a Museum Now?, 15.

as it had been arguably up until the 1990s. Everyone is fighting for the consumers time, their attention, and, ultimately, some combination of their laziness and their data. Unlike times before, every function at one of these companies relates very quickly back to the creation of this trap. Before, only the marketers would have to ensure, for example, that Americans eat bananas, while most other functions, like managing plantations, negotiating distribution, and so on, had little to do with the ultimate trap. User profiles were irrelevant, as the needs satisfied, such as hunger, were universal. Today, however, everyone is creating the trap. Firms essentially employ millions of people, of all expertise, to build the best trap from every direction. User interface designers have to make the application easy to use, user experience designers need to ensure the application is enticing enough to bring people back and deliver what they want when they want it, financial teams work to make sure the monetization method is so hidden the user barely realizes who they are benefiting and when, and so on and so forth. In a community teaming with people who all design traps, it is understandable one would find it rather disappointing to realize they are walking in a trap that is not made special for them. It would be the highest insult; telling the visitor that their presence wasn't important enough to study. In order to maintain attraction in this individualistic culture, firms must acknowledge the individual, by providing services which adapt specifically to the users need. The failure to be sold to, in this day and age, is a barrier equivalent to the culturally classist rules of old Europe.

Botta not only built the SFMOMA before there was the expectation of personalized exploitation but at a time when "man's needs" were still relatively universal. In the 1990s, there were still a set of universal "burdens" a majority of people experienced as a defacto part of life. Commuters waited for buses or drove themselves through traffic to get to work. Several chores were required to maintain life, such as cleaning the house, walking the dog, buying and cooking food, and washing and folding clothing. Somewhere within the last 10 years, society lost the idea that these tasks should be universal. Quickly, one could contract-out all of these tasks whenever they wanted from their phone. Those burdens, or responsibilities, were shifted, from the backs of full-time employees to flocks of disenfranchised contract workers. With this new sea of anonymous personal assistants, the concept of a universal experience has almost entirely shrunk away. The ability to pay-away "burdens" like buying food and doing laundry produced an entirely new class of people who consider themselves exempt from any concept of basic needs. This cultural change dated the Botta design. Built in a time of universal experiences, Botta imposed order and direction onto visitors. Instead of building based on the individual preference of several revenue-generating groups, Botta built based on his own

principles. Botta sought to accomplish three things; to create a form which is easy to read, allow for natural light and create a “styleless” building.

Botta’s SFMOMA both sets us at ease and demands our attention. It offers hierarchical typography, with the eye drawn up towards this cathedral-like eye, extending towards the sun, connecting the land with what is above (See Figure 1). When you look at the building, both from inside and from outside, you are aware of this focal point. The building is built of rather modest materials, but it highlights and harnesses the sun, arguably the noblest thing to harness.

The SFMOMA alludes to the Mayan temples of the Yucatan (See Figure 2). These temples also instantly demand attention towards the standing place at the top, the point closest to the sun. Like the SFMOMA towers over the mid-level shops nearby, the temples rise above the treetops, allowing an above earth view. No matter how you look at it, you know the focal point of these buildings, the platform above.

As Botta says, “The monument is the affirmation of the value of human labor.”⁵ Mayan temples demand you to think about the sheer human force behind them. People harnessed such a strong desire to impact and defy nature that they moved hundreds of thousands of tons of stone to build such monumental forms. Much of the magic of these creations are in this accomplishment, the movement of many to do the seemingly impossible. When standing at the foot of such monuments, we understand the power of the controlled masses. This organized creation was orchestrated by a ruler, not by a commune, so when we look at such a building we understand both the power of the common people and the power of the leader.

Many criticize Botta’s work as being unwelcoming and hermetic. The redesigned was tasked, in part, with replacing his hierarchical form with one of openness. When examined in the lens of the economic shift between the 1990s and 2010s, the rationale becomes clear. Modern capitalists no longer wish to appear powerful and grand. Instead, they seek increased transparency and collaboration. This is demonstrated through the erosion of clear career ladders and dress-down Fridays, and also through the forms of the buildings themselves. New capitalist buildings demand openness and softness, steering clear of dark colors and geometric typography.

When you examine the shift in business models which occurred during this time, it becomes clear this is much more of a facade than a genuine change in values. Previously, capitalists had benefited from the exploitation of physical resources. Political power was used to maintain the capitalists’ access to these resources, which can be demonstrated through the Monroe Doctrine in Banana Republics. The most successful capitalists of modern times

⁵ Architecture and Morality, 130.

however, focus on the exploitation of humans, providing psychological comfort in exchange for valuable time and data. This relies entirely on the continued engagement of both the laborers and the consumers. For this reason, the powerful image of the capitalists must be replaced with warmth and openness. Facebook, for example, fares much better with the mission statement of creating a more connected future, than providing psychologically addicting content in exchange for the monopoly on public thought. Only warmth and openness allows Facebook to keep its users returning steadily, despite the alarming ramifications on the democratic processes that have been recently revealed.

The new SFMOMA shouts the same message; we are completely equal with you. It also reminds the person they are unique and important. Public galleries, fun spots for photos and an AI chatbot to receive text messages of art, all shout that the art institute is nothing but whatever you make of it. The building, in turn, must not demonstrate any human labor. Instead it looks unrealistic, the clear product of computer-aided modeling, reminds you the only human hand at play is your own.

Architecture has the unique ability to create a moment, to allow, or force, a pause on the natural life and path of a visitor. Museums inherently include many small moments, the breaths where the passerby pauses in front of one piece, before marching onwards to the next.⁶ The Botta and the Snøhetta versions of the SFMOMA both impose additional moments, unrelated to the art, which shares with us a little bit of what each architect values.

The Botta museum fosters two twin moments: one upon entry, and once upon completion of the museum. As soon as one pushes through the revolving door and enters the lobby, their eyes are drawn upwards and they are forced to pause. The openness of the space, with floating staircases marching into the lit-sphere, demand attention (See Figure 3). The horizontal lines rising into the atrium create instant scale. It is here Botta reminds man of his orientation within the cosmos, creating a collective pause. Efforts to dig out tickets, or pull off layers, will be interrupted, for at least a moment, to marvel in this sight.

Upon completion of the gallery on the fifth floor, one is invited across the transparent suspension bridge, to enjoy life as the light itself does; exploring every piece of the museum below. Even though the entire museum is simple and clear, this bridge provides a breath. The contrast is incredible, the entire building is massive and dense, unapologetically built of stone, yet the bridge is light, metal and transparent, allowing you to suddenly float. The bridge also captures a particular moment in the collective psychology of the visitor. Art demands attention, and in a museum, a visitor finds themselves engulfed in one piece until suddenly another

⁶ Sakellaridou, 121.

catches their eye, and they proceed onwards. The bridge, however, provides a moment of observation, but nothing to observe. In contrast to the gallery museum, the viewer is invited to stand still, and study anything and everything moving around in the space below. It is as if the building itself reminds you that while you came to the museum to study the works of a few greats, you are part of a living and breathing city, and that should you examine it in its totality, there too will you find art.

Both of these moments define time and order, remind visitors of hierarchy within the space, and demand the viewer to share with the populous. They force the values Botta hopes to share. He reminds people of the city, which is a living and breathing collective. He provides them with the psychological comfort of direction while reminding them there are higher and better things than themselves in the world. He forces the individual to acknowledge the passage of time, both of millennia, and only the moments they spend in the building. He says, in essence, that one is to remember this trip, and forces them to acknowledge their progression, both physically and through learning. This moment he creates is one so grand it is impossible to capture in one easily-digestible image.

In this day and age, however, museums seek to create moments which are easily captured and shared. Modern museums require social media promotion to maintain a steady flow of visitors. For this reason, “the building itself has become a marketable product.”⁷ Starchitects are increasingly employed to bring attention to new museums. The SFMOMA has even created an AI chatbot that shares curated art pieces with users, anywhere in the world.⁸ All this online presence seems like it may render the actual museum trip obsolete. To the contrary, art online seems to serve only as an invitation, not a substitution, as attendance records have continued to rise.⁹ The allure of enticing new visitors has led some museums to go as far as to sell off pieces in their collection to finance a redesign.¹⁰ While this may come as a surprise, the economic return on a starchitect piece has been demonstrated, with the Guggenheim Museum serving as the most notable example.

The living wall at the new SFMOMA demonstrates the new emphasis on social sharing for museum marketing. On the 5th floor, a balcony opens. It is long and skinny, running alongside the building. The opposite wall is covered floor to ceiling with plants (See Figure 4). My natural inclination, being fascinated with cities, was to scoot straight to the side and look out at the people below. The intended moment, however, is for you to pull out your phone and snap

⁷ Formed and Forming, 300.

⁸ Send Me SFMOMA, 1.

⁹ Formed and Forming, 311.

¹⁰ Seeing a Cash Cow, 1.

a picture of yourself and/or a loved one in front of the wall. It is amazing how much attention the wall gets; it is different enough to be photo-worthy but is in no way jaw-dropping. In fact, you would look rather strange to just stare at the living wall, but you look rather normal turning your back to it in order to snap a selfie.

Surprisingly, I found the change in emphasis on individuality most present in the SFMOMA bathrooms. The bathrooms in the new SFMOMA are the only part of the building with color (See Figure 5). They are flooded with bright colored walls and lights, with each floor featuring a different color. This invites a moment which is rather common culturally, the selfie. This allows the visitor to reinterpret their own image in this new light and capture it in a socially acceptable way.

Notable to me, in the lucky times where I was able to visit the Botta building, was the bathroom. When you enter it's so black and green and the mirrors somehow bounce back and forth off of each other forever. In contrast to the entry, you are suddenly without direction. You also realize, no matter how much you try to look past it, all you can see is yourself; direction, but inward. While these both are dazzling moments, the Botta bathroom was not able to be captured by the camera. In contrast, the Snøhetta bathroom encourages you to bring out your phone.

The change in design between the old and the new SFMOMA clearly reflects the new shift towards individualism in San Francisco culture. This shift, however, only addresses changes in cultural values of those benefiting from the domination of global technology companies. Neither Botta or Snøhetta provide direct references to the "lower class" people of SFMOMA. Any connection with anyone other than both the cultural and economic elites is modest and often disguised.

The Botta SFMOMA acknowledges the lower class but does not directly seek to serve them. The heavy stone building reminds the visitor that it is man-made. With this, the Botta building admits the lower class provided the structure, but it is well understood the building was not made for them in mind. The imposing structure reinforces the divinity of art, imposing taste, which is often restricted based on social class and, more specifically, educational attainment. The Botta museum does not invite the lower-class into the museum but does acknowledge their presence within San Francisco. On the other hand, the Snøhetta SFMOMA works to erase all indication of the lower class while removing barriers to entry. The futuristic exterior reinforces the power of the tech-enabled upper class by highlighting a construction style that requires greatly fewer man-hours than bricklaying, for example. It is as if the building seeks to tell the world they can build and do great things without a lower class at all.

This disappearance of the lower class reflects a major cultural change in the period between 1995 and 2016. Not only does tech divide the upper and the lower class more economically, but it also provides a spatial and emotional divide as well. Popular on-demand apps such as Uber and Lyft allow upper-class people to exploit the lower class without any of the emotions which come with an interpersonal relationship. Requesting a ride through an app, for example, allows the user to forget that another person is earning a living waiting to be their personal driver. These companies foster a greater sense of individualism in upper-class users while reducing the appearance of individualism in the lower-class workers. Furthermore, the fact that these workers are labeled as “contractors” who can “be their own boss” allows the rich to maintain their illusion that the poor, like themselves, are voluntary participants in the tech-enabled economy. If their Uber driver is “choosing” to drive, they must be benefiting as well. This diminishes the systematic barriers which allowed the upper-class to succeed and force the lower-class to provide on-demand services to survive. A personalized experience, with no reminder of the poorer people who enable them, allows the new upper-class to experience luxury without suffering any guilt or experiencing any responsibility. The Snohetta SFMOMA provides this by removing physical references to “ditch diggers”. By providing a heightened illusion of openness through the multiple entrances, non-hierarchical form, and two levels of free access, the rich no longer need to bear the burden of their privilege. Just as the title “contractor” provides a false sense of self-determination, the openness provides the illusion of equality, while ignoring the time and educational limitations which restrict the museum-experience from the poor.

All in all, the change between the old and the new SFMOMA are drive to serve a new community with new cultural values. Shifting away from reminders of class and towards an individualistic experience, the SFMOMA is able to increase revenue generating behaviors, such as museum attendance, online promotion and on-site purchases. These changes didn't happen overnight, rather, they are the direct effect of the change in business model experienced during the period.

Images



Figure 1 - The SFMOMA maintains a hierarchical structure, with horizontal lines reinforcing the pyramid-like ascent.



Figure 2 - The Mayan Temple of Kukulcan in what is now Méxicó also provides a geometric ascent, in efforts to reach towards the sun.



Figure 3 - The staircase the Bottta SFMOMA, much like the building's exterior, draw attention up towards the artium.



Figure 4 - The Snøhetta living wall provides a backdrop of the courtyard. The wall offers no focal point, but provides a socially acceptable location for snapping a photo.



Figure 5 - The bathrooms in the Snøhetta SFMOMA are the only location with color. Each level is covered in a different arresting color, providing the visitor a moment of pause, in the solidarity of the restroom.