

# The Getty Center

DESIGN  
CHALLENGE

Ordinarily, I try to visit a place several times before writing a Design Challenge, but it took a half-dozen visits to get a handle on this world-famous art museum in Los Angeles. The architect, Richard Meier, has done an admirable job in creating a monument, but that's the problem: it comes across as a monument, not a vibrant place to explore and reflect upon how artists respond to the world. The buildings feel cold, hard, austere. The entrance hall would be appropriate for a bank perhaps, or a modern office building, but fails to introduce or resonate with the art that lies ahead. Meier says the tram that takes the visitors up a hill from the parking area conveys the feeling of "being elevated out of their day-to-day experience," but instead of arriving at a Greek Delphi, they arrive at something akin to a hospital ship grounded on the shoals above LA. Interestingly, they have to have "greeters" meet you on arrival because it is not clear where to go.

Upon entering, there is an information counter, a desk for a self-guided audio tour called "The Getty Guide," and an "Orientation Theater" stuck in an overlooked corner of the entrance hall, including an obligatory "orientation



film.” Regrettably, none of this rises to the level of great interpretation.

What a lost opportunity. With a budget that any public jewel would die for, those responsible for the Getty couldn’t get beyond the curiosity cabinets of 400 years ago. Collection places like this began as display cabinets full of interesting natural and cultural items in the homes of wealthy Europeans during the western Age of Exploration.

Ironically, the center was selling a history of curiosity cabinets (**Cabinets of Wonder**) in the museum store, but couldn’t push beyond it in their design and interpretation. If they would have hired an interpretive designer first to help them determine what kind of dance they wanted the visitors to have in the center, they could have produced something truly revolutionary, but Meier’s pavilions are little more than a cluster of giant curiosity cabinets. Is this the best we can do in the 21st century?

How could the Getty Trust spend its millions on the setting and structure and pay so little attention to the interpretive experience of the visitors? Is that what inevitably happens when the money of the rich goes to creating a monument for displaying their collections?

When the curiosity cabinet has become the attraction rather than its contents, how do interpreters proceed? When visitors don’t go for the art, but the structures containing it, what have we lost? (The Getty offers more architectural and garden tours than art tours. The buildings and the setting has taken precedence over the collection.)

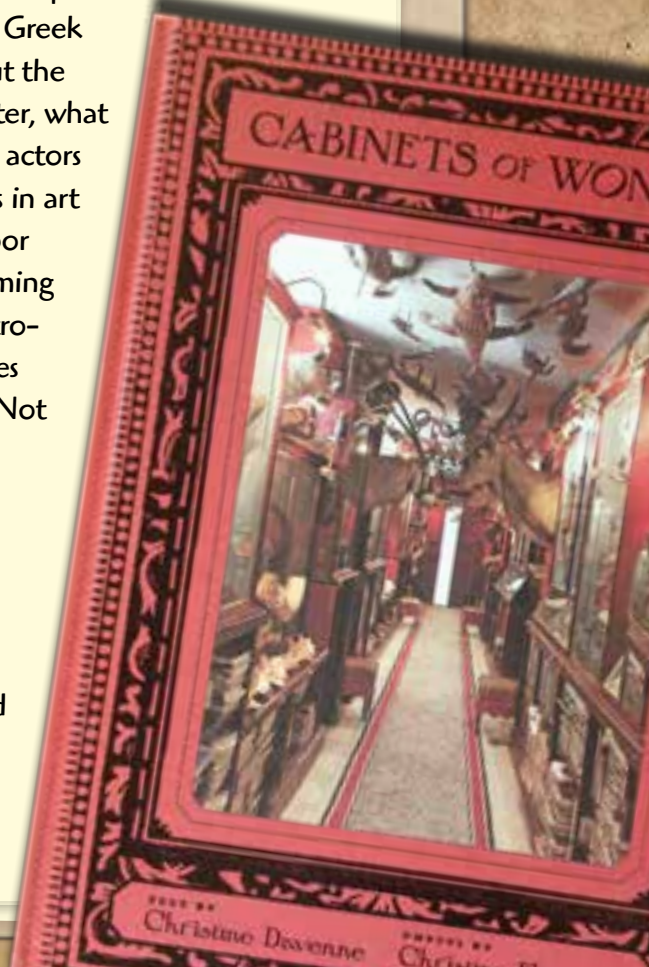
No doubt, a place like the Getty is doing a lot of valuable work in the art world, but it is clear there was little consideration given to interpretive design in creating this jewel.



The visitors' actual experience appears to have been a post-construction consideration, not an initial planning factor. Unfortunately, interpreters are still seen as park rangers and nature center staff, not as experiential designers and facilitators. For the most part, the profession of natural and cultural interpretation has failed to move beyond that perception into the world of galleries, museums, gardens, zoos, monuments, etc.

With a little work, the open courtyards among Meier's "pavilions" could be re-purposed as gathering places for the artists and philosophers of different eras to discuss the meaning and value of art. Imagine arriving in such an open-air space where costumed interpreters were arguing about the purpose of art and its meaning in people's lives. Surely, provocative scripts could be written in LA for such productions. Or an actor dressed as a Greek philosopher could be talking about the nature of beauty. Or for that matter, what about open-air demonstrations by actors representing various developments in art through the centuries? The outdoor spaces at The Getty should be teeming with activity as staging areas for introducing and explaining the processes that created the products inside. Not surprisingly, they are used for little more than eating and drinking.

Sadly, the garden setting for the museum has neither the uncontrolled exuberance of an English cottage garden, nor the controlled palette of Monet's garden at Giverny. Either one might have worked here, although I would



# Map &

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have opted for a Mediterranean garden in keeping with the blocks of Italian travertine used to construct the buildings. Instead, the garden at The Getty is a kind of pinched jumble. The designer, Robert Irwin, claims it is "a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art." But what the center needed was not another piece of art to view, but an oasis in which to relax and reflect upon the art inside, with spaces to interact with what others were thinking. You can't help but wonder if this is the result when an artist aspiring to be a garden designer is given too much money. Although not a great fan of "Geometric White" Mr. Meier, I suspect The Getty would have been better off with the coherence his own garden design might have brought to the setting. I would not go so far as to characterize the garden as a carbuncle on the center, as Prince Charles famously referred to the addition constructed for Britain's National Gallery of Art, but it is still unsettling. What is its purpose other than to stroke the designer? A more naturalistic setting would have provided a great foil for Meier's cubic temples, and softened the harder edges of his volumetric rationalization.

Irwin's garden is primarily about display rather than contemplation, and The Getty already has more than enough display. What he created is a kind of stroll park to wander through, taking photos and chatting. There are few places to sit and ponder, and no encouragement to do so. If it was supposed to be a place for sleeping, and taking photos of one another, perhaps it works on that level, but there is no interplay between what is happening inside Meier's white curiosity cabinets and the setting Irwin has created for them. For the self-described richest museum in the world, it is a strange anomaly.

Without knowing their remits, it is hard to be too critical of what Meier and Irwin produced. It may be exactly what the

## T1 Lower Tram Station

Fran and Ray Stark  
Sculpture Garden



## P1 Parking Garage



Arrival Area

directors at The Getty desired. Perhaps they wanted visitors to infer from Meier's structures that art is sacred and geometric, or clipped and channeled as Irwin depicts it. If so, they got it, and that's unfortunate.

The audio tour at The Getty is particularly disappointing. It is the typical litany of names, dates, terms, and techniques, with some tidbits of interest, but what does the visitor do with the information that the bird in a silver sculpture was a rare one? There is some historical grounding and some things to note, but there is no explanation for why the objects chosen for the tour are considered highlights, and little connection to anything before or after – the recorded explanation often just ends abruptly, or suggests the visitors "look around this gallery." Thirty minutes after completing the tour, what is someone taking away? The Getty staff must have had some visitor outcomes in mind, but it is hard to imagine what those could be.

Where is the pain of those who suffered to create these visual masterpieces that we so blithely display? Where is the invitation to sacrifice in the same way to bring something priceless to the world? If art is a particularly human response to the natural and cultural processes of the world, surely some of its products should be used to illustrate that reality. The Getty doesn't use its riches to illustrate much of anything. The point seems to be to impress, not inspire.

Naturally, all this raises the question: what is the purpose of a collection place, and what kind of experience should visitors have there? On a deeper level, what does an egalitarian society do with all the marvelous objects accumulated by those who reaped (or raped) its wealth? If the physical structure of The Getty was supposed to impress the untutored masses huddled in the city below, it probably succeeds. But

THE GETTY CENTER

Shop  
Villion, Plaza Level  
for Photographs Shop  
Villion, Terrace Level

Upper Level  
Changing Exhibitions  
Consult current exhibition  
listings in the Museum  
Entrance Hall.

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Terrace Cafe \$5  
Level  
Seasonally

Plaza Level  
Changing Exhibitions  
Sculpture Hall  
Reading Room  
Consult current exhibition  
listings in the Museum  
Entrance Hall.

what do they take home? A new or renewed feeling for the cultural importance of art? A commitment to engage more personally and directly with art in their own lives? A deeper understanding that art exists not on a hill for the rich, but in the heart of the human response to the world? Regrettably, The Getty's primary success may be in conveying that art is "out of reach" for most people.

Like many public jewels, The Getty has a mission statement, but like many such statements, it states what the center wants to do, not what it actually does:

*The J. Paul Getty Museum seeks to inspire curiosity about, and enjoyment and understanding of, the visual arts by collecting, conserving, exhibiting, and interpreting works of art of outstanding quality and historical importance.*

What is The Getty doing to "inspire curiosity" or "interpreting works of art"? Clearly, its emphasis remains on the "collecting, conserving, and exhibiting" parts of its mission. As the world creates more and more collection places like The Getty, and the numbers of visitors to them continues to decline, the response has been to create more and more dramatic structures and settings for them rather than richer illustrative experiences with their contents.

On the tram back to the world below that Meier claimed we were escaping, the recorded narration states that "Visitors are at the center of everything we do at The Getty." If that was true, they would surely have a different take on interpretation. One would hope that one of the world's preeminent art institutions would be on the cutting edge of interpretation rather than adhering to a past relic of it.