

Class, Culture, and Capitalism Collide: Researching the Redesign of the San Francisco Museum of Art

In my Contemporary Architecture research paper, “Botta to Snøhetta; Cultural Changes between the 1990s and 2010s” I argue the 2016 redesign of the San Francisco Museum of Art (SFMOMA) served to reinforce and support the new business models of modern capitalists. Having grown up in Berkeley and worked in San Francisco, I have watched the effects of the global technology-based economy unfold before my eyes. This research paper was my first opportunity to conduct a critical critique of a topic so ubiquitous in my life. Investigating the forces behind this transformation was the most fun I have had in my academic career.

When presented with the prompt, to research a contemporary architecture and relate it to the political, economic and cultural context in which it’s built, I knew exactly what I would research. I had just returned from my second summer working in venture capital in San Francisco. My office was located in “The SoMa” district, just two blocks from the museum. I had fond childhood memories at the museum, but for some reason, the redesign bothered me. Every time I walked past, I was overcome with a sense of discontent so profound, I knew I had to figure out why.

When I shared my intentions with Professor Sadler, he immediately lit up. He had the same immediate reaction as I had when he first learned of the oncoming redesign. “The beautiful stairs,” he cried, and I nodded, reminiscing the good old days. He found the redesign so tragic, he removed the museum from all of his curricula. We both knew there was something distinctly profound about the change. A quick Google search revealed the sense of tragedy that my professor and I experienced was not universal. Articles in architectural magazines and large newspapers alike praised the redesign, both upon its announcement and grand opening. Clearly, there was something that we were missing.

This began the pattern I took through my entire research. I identified someone or something that I did not understand and tried to figure out what I had overlooked. I sought to understand the backgrounds that gave decision makers and critics a perspective which I lacked. I set off with my first, rather basic, research questions. Why would the SFMOMA decide to redesign the building? What were they looking to maximize for? From there, I was forced to wonder, what was the previous architect, Mario Botta, looking for optimizing for? Why would a

building that was so acclaimed at the time of its construction by deemed unfit a mere 20 years later?

My quest for answers began with primary sources. I read *The Ethics of Building* by Mario Botta. Through a JSTOR search for “Mario Botta” I found two tremendously helpful interviews: “Mario Botta in Conversation with Laurent Stalder” and “Architecture and Morality: An Interview with Mario Botta.” For Snohetta, I read *Conditions: Snøhetta: architecture, interior, landscape* and *Site specific: conversations with Peter Zumthor, Steven Holl, Róisín Heneghan, Bjarne Mastenbroek, Bjarke Ingels, Joshua Prince-Ramus, Patrik Schumacher, Kjetil Thorsen, Craig Dykers, and Harry Gugger*. These resources allowed me to understand the architect's design processes, values and inspiration sources.

Architecture is a unique art form as it can not be completed without the consent or commission of a wealthy client. Thus, to understand the redesign I needed to understand the ambitions of both the architects and the client, the SFMOMA. I researched changes in museum visitor behavior and motivation over time. I also explored changes in revenue streams for museum-owners. I used the keyword of “museum” and the subject filter of “architecture” to find scholarly journal articles such as “Formed and Forming: Contemporary Museum Architecture.” I also examined more subtle indications of the museum’s changing priorities. The “San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Architectural Fact Sheet” published by the SFMOMA revealed the disproportionate increase in non-gallery space after the remodel. One can surmise more floor space was allocated to the gift shop and restaurant as an effort to increase profits through on-site purchases instead of larger, or more varied, art exhibits. News articles such as “Seeing a Cash Cow in Museums’ Precious Art” and blogs like “Send Me SFMOMA” also provided valuable insight on the new financial priorities of museum-owners. When looking for such SFMOMA-specific information, I found non-scholarly resources to be much more up-to-date.

In addition, I paid careful attention to the physical construction of the buildings. I examine each of Botta’s design choices, and the subsequent alternation, replacement, or maintenance by Snohetta, as intentional and important. I visited the museum and walked through the new design. I studied the program of the building and found maps of the block through the UC Davis online database so I could observe the city change from the early 1990s to the present day.

The Snohetta SFMOMA has a sleek, modern facade which allowed for efficient construction. This construction choice struck me as entirely illogical. Why build such a modest and economic building in the peak of such a huge financial boom in that very city? Throughout history, periods of extreme prosperity produced marvelous decorated buildings which have left the world slack-jawed for centuries. What about San Francisco in the 2010s discouraged the fantastical demonstrations of wealth that had been the hallmark of economic prosperity for centuries?

At the same time, I had to move thinking only about the architect and the client to thinking about the city, and its citizens, as a whole. An accidental observation of a coinciding change catalyzed this approach. One day on BART I noticed a passenger wearing a work ID bag on her hip. From my seat, I could see her employer's name, a photo, her name, and very large across the bottom, in text larger than everything else on the ID, an outrageously long employee ID number. I could not understand her desire to wear her work ID voluntarily. It told the world nothing about the type of work she did, only that she was one of the thousands of employees at her company. When I realized almost half of the other passengers were doing the same thing, I decided to investigate the social and cultural effect of these larger employers on the city.

Questions like these required creative, interdisciplinary and historical approaches to research. The 2016 redesign was rather recent, so there were relatively few peer-reviewed articles that even mentioned the building. Most of the available information was released by the museum itself, or by Snohetta, the architectural firm. Interviews and books by the firm and its architects were helpful, but by no means sufficient. They provided valuable insight into how the firm views its work, and the details they feel worthy of attention. This bias in perspective was insightful when complemented with extensive other research but a threat to my argument's integrity if utilized alone. Further, there were very few peer-reviewed articles that discussed the effects of new business models on architecture, or culture. My topic was so new that I had to dive into the past to build my perspective.

To understand the relative modesty of the Snohetta redesign, I had to look beyond the SFMOMA. I noticed that the Salesforce tower, another recent capitalist construction mere blocks from the SFMOMA presented a similar decidedly-uneventful facade. There were very few peer-reviewed articles that discussed the effects of new business models on architecture, or culture. My topic was so new, that I had to dive into the past to build my perspective. I met with my

professor, who encouraged me to explore similar moments of economic, cultural and architectural change in modern history. *Manhattan Skyscrapers* introduced me to other buildings which adopted a similar modest facade during times of prosperity. Through *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, I learned about the changes in management structures over between the 1960s and the 1990s. *Distinction; A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* provided sociological insight on the accumulation and transfer of social distinction. I also researched themes in architecture, as they related to both architects and the museum as a whole. I researched the SFMOMA architect's role models, including Aldo Rossi. I used keywords such as globalization, regionalism, localism, pluralism, populism, and individualism to find scholarly articles on these topics. I used subject restrictions such as "architecture" and "American studies" to increase the relevance of my results.

During the Camp Fire, and subsequent campus closure, I utilized even more off-campus resources. I installed the UC Davis Library VPN and conducted extensive research through the online database. I realized that most of the books that were coming up on the UC-wide search were in UC Berkeley's Environmental Design Library. I had previously had received architecture books from UCLA and UC Berkeley through the intercampus loan system. During the campus closure, I decided to visit UC Berkeley's Environmental Design Library myself. There, I consulted with a librarian, who was also a UC Davis alumni and used my UC Davis student status to receive a reciprocal library card. It was at the Environmental Design Library where I found the books with the most detailed plans and architectural models. Using the UC Davis and UC Berkeley research resources allowed me to receive all the guidance and resources I needed to build a successful analysis.

While this research was difficult it was incredibly fulfilling. I enjoyed the challenge of finding new and creative ways to build research-based arguments. Researching two relatively-new buildings required I use historical information, and cross-disciplinary resources. My connecting economic, social and cultural theories with the physical design of two notable architects, I made fascinating discoveries about the recent history of San Francisco. I am incredibly proud to have produced a compelling research paper on a topic which has never been discussed in this lense before.