

## Porosity and the Pérez Art Museum Miami



Georges Bataille once compared a visit to the museum to an internal cleansing: “A museum is like the lungs of a great city. The crowd floods in the museum every Sunday like blood and it leaves purified and fresh.” Written when Classical architecture was being eclipsed by the new heroism of Modernism, Bataille’s critique casts the museum as a vital organ. It serves a primary function in a city’s both internal and e(x)ternal preservation. In turn, it interconnects the veins of secondary urbanism to other such places—traditionally in the form of civic buildings. Yet we exist in a post-millennial world comprised of latitudes and longitudes, the micro and the macro, and the terrestrial relational to the extraterrestrial. Skimming along the earth’s surface is a skein-like substance, its networks, strands and intensities are transformational and continuous. It is Deleuze and Guattari’s body without organs. We might therefore conclude that the new Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) is a relic of sorts. It is a building with a function that aggregates and binds. The museum is a monument. It is architecture proper.

The design initially takes these cues with references to such universal and regional typologies. Three-story concrete columns are recessed within a portico-like roof structure. The building is raised on a monumentalizing plinth chiseled with terracing stairs—A temple of Apollo has landed. Mitigating this is the influence of the local vernacular, specifically Stiltsville, through an articulation of elevated delicacy and response to climate. This mixture results in the deployment of large-scale overhangs that establish forty percent of the square footage of the museum on the exterior. But if one considers the issue of site specificity, these readings of PAMM are limited and out of context. PAMM is not perched above the city with a privileged view and frozen stance. Nor is it located outside the city, on the margins of regulation and incorporation. It is located right in the crosshairs of multiple urban and geographic pressures along the water’s edge in Downtown Miami.

Surrounded by what will be Museum Park, PAMM’s location is notched on a protruding wedge of land sandwiched between Biscayne Boulevard, the MacArthur Causeway, and Biscayne Bay. The building location essentially bookends the engineered port entry of Government Cut. What spans between the two poles are the Port of Miami and the newest infrastructural project, the Miami Tunnel. One can envision the tunnel’s boring machine, named Harriet, spinning her way through the rock and soil below ground just as hurricanes Andrew, Wilma and Katrina made their impressions above. All of this picturesquely frames a deep aperture of the Port’s cargo and cruise ships as they traverse to and from the horizon of the Atlantic. These geopolitical ebbs and flows pervade the edge of a gateway city that could be construed as a 21st-century Venice. Therefore, the site, or more precisely the situation of PAMM, is porous.

In a city whose elevation averages only six feet, Apollonian verticality in architecture is confronted with the horizontal or the Dionysian. Stillness and timelessness are lacerated by accelerated gasps in movements of goods and services. Miami’s urbanism is not set in stone but rather is a dense territorial

interweaving of shifting identity, im/permanence and market speculation. This massive stratum of import and export is shaken and stirred with the always present and future potential of massive concentrations of water. PAMM's raised-ground floor begins just above sea level—a virtual tipping point or datum that designates storm surge. It's a margin that distinguishes emergence from submergence by the thinnest of margins. In the worst-case scenario, PAMM's exterior steps would act as a ruler to measure the incoming tide as it engulfs the site. One can envision the water coursing through the open treads and gaps as the underground parking soaks it up like a sponge.

Above is equivalent. Rather than solid overhangs creating steep orchestrated angles of sunlight, a gigantic trellis of concrete 'T' beams *disperses* both light and rain. Piercing intermittenly are nested clusters of tentacled vegetation that lace through the beams like stalactites. They invade the exposed exterior and can be read as organic doubles of the structural columns, or perhaps as a Cartesian Other itself. Diagonally interlocked to provide stability, the geometries resemble cosmological webs or something more grounded—beached seaweed or Portuguese man o' war. Hovering just above the top of the ground floor level, they clear a horizontal band of deep concrete mullions that continuously wrap around the building. The mullions encase glass or wood entry doors, creating a permeable and compressed membrane. It feels as if we may seep into the interior by osmosis.



Léonard Thiry, "Saturn," from set of 20 grotesque panels containing pagan divinities, Engraving on paper, French, 16th Century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Léonard Thiry's "Diana"

Supported by a system of concrete floors, over fifty percent of the building slabs are voided or hallowed by grids of plastic 'bubble' spheres. They lighten the load and strengthen rigidity by protecting the steel

bones from incoming salt spray. The intensive properties of salt necessitate a response that is literalized, creating a series of chain reactions both in material and spatial genesis. Larger spans between columns allow for an expansive field that equalizes the proportion of positive and negative space. Connective tissue called Overview galleries thread between cubic volumes that comprise Focus and Anchor galleries. The defined volumes are exposed on the exterior. They are floating organs, hanging and peering between the overhangs and Medusa-like greenery. The building is therefore not yet a body without organs, but it is as if the body has been inverted. The chipped concrete walls are monolithic except for occasional punctures of glass that frame vistas of both the bay and Downtown. Averaging modules of eight by seventeen-feet and able to withstand 150-mph winds, they are the largest impact-resistant windows ever produced.. Overall, the design's tendency is to allow the city to infringe on the building's autonomy by any means necessary. This evolving morphology brings to mind the tactics of the Grotesque. In that decorative tradition, there was a hybridizing of human to animal, animal to vegetable, vegetable to architecture and so on, so that the conventional schemata of center versus margin was contestable ground. In this case, the museum's conceptual and material ground is likewise simultaneously figure and field, oscillating between static forms and frayed edges.

The museum as lung is, in the case of the PAMM, accurate, but not as Bataille would have it. This museum does not purify itself of the city. The architecture is a huge inhalation and subsequent exhalation of the city. It is as if there is a horizontal expansion, a stretching of the thresholds that designate centers from margins. The building has a lateral proportion that would align it more with levees and landscape than monuments and markers. However, Herzog & de Meuron's approach never lapses into mere surface parametrics or topologically based tropes. What makes the building unique is that it shamelessly begins with convention and—not unlike the genre of the Grotesque—allows for the outside in and the inside out.