



Ilya Lipkin, Liberalism Militant, 2020

Unschöne Museen

While its effectiveness as an instrument of social change can be questioned, architecture plays a central role in making the spaces and symbols of power. If institutions embody the values of the societies from which they emerge, it is architects who imagined how these structures can project power and be instruments of social control. Within the inventory of public institutions, from tombs to parliaments, custom houses to prisons, the museum seems a benevolent member of the family, caring for precious objects, giving wider and deeper access to society's treasures. The last four decades have seen a physical and programmatic expansion of museums that has made them an important part of the contemporary city's image and economy, at the same time as engaging with ever larger and more diverse audiences. Architects have been implicated in these transformations, becoming increasingly active parts of these expanded global cultural networks.

After this heyday, we are now witnessing a wide-reaching revision of the museum as we know it. Beyond the efforts of institutional critique, the museum today is no longer regarded as a site of beauty or spectacle, but rather as a problem context calling for repair. Until recently, the world of art and architecture enduringly published and advocated the promise of the museum of the future. Today, the lens through which we view this institution is tainted and a review of the museum as an institution is back on the table. The museum remains a place of classification, and therefore of exclusion and of often obscure structural dependencies between the institution and its stakeholders. The museum has revealed itself as a site of violence, its architecture and operations reinforcing societal inequality.

This year the overall theme of the diploma is expanding to explicitly encompass social as well as physical sustainability, with its reference to the United Nations' SDG 11 for Sustainable Cities and Communities. Our studio will respond to the ongoing revision of museums by closely investigating a group of Swiss collection-based museums, as a way of better understanding the relationship between specific social situations, their institutions, and cultural artefacts. We will engage in detail with the human, material and spatial relationships that characterise these museums and the constituencies that they encompass.

We will meet the people who run and use these museums and will have workshops with historians and critics who are developing effective institutional critiques of the contemporary museum. With this granular knowledge about the social as well as the material conditions of these public buildings, the design phase of the diploma will develop designs that transform the extent, organisation and the displays of collections, framing them in new ways with architectures that enable the content, the experience and the social relevance of the museum to be rediscovered.

Diploma, HS 2023, ETH Zürich
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