

## **Z33 Hasselt: *Hortus Conclusus* as a Model for an Urban Interior**

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### **Abstract**

*This contribution reviews the recent renovation of Z33—House for Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture in Hasselt, Belgium—in the light of its unique implementation of different levels of interiority. The institute is housed in the former beguinage, a site with a rich and layered history and one of the few green public spaces in the city centre. The intervention by architect Francesca Torzo builds further on and strengthens the existing qualities of the site through a creative process of copying and improving. By doing so, she changed the overall appearance of the beguinage, strengthening its quality as an enclosed public space—an intimate yet collective hortus conclusus.*

*Keywords: Z33, Francesca Torzo, beguinage, hortus conclusus, public interior, museum architecture*

## Introduction

Since 2002, Z33 House for Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture in Hasselt (Belgium) established an international reputation with its exhibitions of upcoming artists and art projects in public space. The institute is housed in the former *beguinage*, a site with a rich and layered history, but its infrastructure was insufficient to realise Z33's potentials and ambitions. When in 2010, the adjacent school building became available, it was an opportunity to extend the museum with a new wing. The Italian architect, Francesca Torzo, won the competition with a highly contextual design that was not just respectful towards the existing historical context, but sensitively incorporates and elevates the qualities of the site in the design of the new building. In this contribution, we review the recent renovation of Z33 in the light of its unique implementation of different levels of interiority.

The project has been widely published, including extensive descriptions of the building and the underlying concept, interviews with the architect, director, and professional photographers.<sup>1</sup> In this contribution, we aim to move beyond a mere description of the project. Instead, we aim to show how the project addresses the notion of interiority through its relation with the existing modern exhibition wing as well as with the *beguinage* and its surrounding historic fabric. This essay presents our very personal evaluation of the project based on several site visits and illustrated with a series of sketches. Apart from providing illustrations for this essay, the process of sketching on site also steered our observations and spatial analysis. The sketchbook, hence, became our fieldnotes—a mnemonic back-up system made for personal reconstruction and analysis (Heynickx, Plevoets, Van Cleempoel, & Vanrie, 2014; Sanjek, 1990).

Moreover, we aim to position this project in a broader discourse on interiority. The notion of interiority in our contribution is not considered as spatial demarcation, but a sensorial condition that might be aroused by characteristics of the environment—its built forms as well as natural and intangible elements (Teston, 2020). Pimlott (2018) defines interiority as a condition of inwardness and contemplation, in which by withdrawing from the world, the individual enters a world of one's own and achieves a kind of freedom. Elaborating on Georg Simmel's essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Simmel, 2012), Pimlott argues that this sense of freedom might be experienced in the anonymity of the public spaces within

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<sup>1</sup> For photographs see for example Z33's official webpage: <http://www.z33.be/>

the city, rather than the domestic sphere with the proximity of family or familiar community. As examples of public spaces that enhance interiority, he names, among many other examples, the ruins of the Palace of the Republic in Berlin, Sesc Pompeia and Teatro Oficina in Sao Paulo by Lina Bo Bardi, and Palais de Tokyo in Paris by Lacaton and Vassal. These public interiors, spaces that are regarded public regardless of their ownership, are places that are both formative as well as demonstrative for the society, their values and ideas about citizens' relations to each other and the various agents of power. They are places that represent and define a society's (moral) identity (Pimlott, 2016).

### **Shifting Borders**

Although the history of the beguines<sup>2</sup> in Hasselt goes back to the 13th century, the current beguinage had its origin in 1707. The beguine houses, each with a small front garden oriented towards the central square, formed a secluded site with a church as its central focal point. Under Napoleonic rule, the beguines were expelled, and the site was secularised. During WWII, the bombing destroyed the church and some of the houses. After the war, the north-western part of the site, which was the oldest part of the beguinage, was beyond repair; the remaining beguine houses were restored and used as the city library, the remains of the church were kept as a romantic ruin and the central square became a public garden. In 1958, a modern exhibition building was constructed at the site, which forms a sharp contrast, both in style and scale, with the Gothic Revival architecture of the beguine houses (Van Cleempoel, forthcoming). In the north, the beguinage borders a former gin distillery, which was protected in the 1970s, and later became a museum of its industrial history; although not part of the beguines, the industrial building has a strong visual impact on the site.

Built on the north-eastern plot, which was historically part of the beguinage, but repurposed as a school in the postwar era, the new museum wing restores the historic border of the site as well as the imprint of the site on the urban layout. On the street side, the new building presents itself as a massive volume with just a single slim opening in the façade, which is the entrance to the museum.

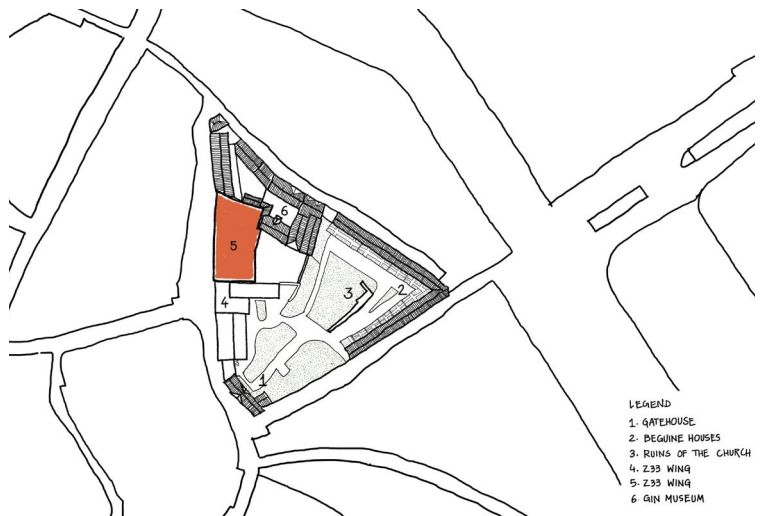
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<sup>2</sup> Beguines were either unmarried or widowed women who entered into a life dedicated to God, but without retiring from the world. The typology of the beguinages, enclosed communities designed to meet the beguines their spiritual and material needs, were developed in the 13th century. The typology is unique to the Low Countries and a selection of Belgium beguinages are protected as UNESCO World Heritage. However, the beguinage of Hasselt is not included in this selection for the many adaptations to the fabric in the course of history.

Figure 1  
Narrow opening  
in the façade  
leading to a  
small garden  
before entering  
the museum  
(Image by Shailja  
Patel)



Figure 2  
The new  
extension  
completes the  
surrounding  
border and  
strengthens the  
*hortus conclusus*  
(Image by Shailja  
Patel)



The façade is entirely covered with deep-red, diamond-shaped brick tiles, which gives the building robustness, while its closed appearance strengthens the secluded character of the beguinage (Figure 1). In the back, the building opens towards the garden of the beguinage through a series of windows. A large terrace added to the Wing 58 strengthens the connection between the museum and the garden.

The remains of the wall that enclosed the site since the 1950s are preserved as a trace of the past. Different than the strict boundary these remains once were, they now form a soft border between the

historic garden of the beguinage on the one side and the garden and terrace of the museum on the other side. Stephan Jay Gould (in Sennett, 2018) describes the difference between border and boundary in natural ecologies: where a boundary is a limitation, the edge where one thing ends the other begins, borders are places of active exchange and interaction. Due to its typology and rich history of the site, the inner garden of the beguinage is characterised by different such sort borders: the ruins of the church, the private gardens in front of the houses, the small enclosed areas shaped by the hedges of the more formal area of the garden at the entrance gate. On the one hand, these traces of former uses make the garden look a bit messy and unorganised. However, on the other hand, these elements also demarcate different areas in the garden and generate their unique and informal atmosphere. It is precisely this that makes the garden attractive to a wider audience, including families with children who like to play in the wilder areas of the garden, youngsters that meet after school, tourists who like to sit on one of the benches eating ice cream. The new extension by the architect completes the surrounding border enclosing the interior garden (Figure 2).

### **Familiar Spaces**

For frequent visitors to Z33, the new museum spaces will feel familiar. Wing 58 has often been described as ‘inappropriate’ to its historical context for its scale and sharp visual contrast with the protected beguinage.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the building has excellent qualities as an exhibition space because of the beautiful proportions of the spaces, the incidence of daylight through glassed ceilings, and large windows that also provide a view to the beguinage garden. Elegant details such as acoustic ceiling panels with geometric patterns and typical 1950s lighting fixtures and iron bannisters give the interior a distinct identity that differentiates it from a mere white cube exhibition room. Francesca Torzo recognised this and cleverly copied these principles in the design of the new wing. The exhibition rooms have varied, sometimes unusual but elegant proportions. They are filled with daylight, which enters the spaces through ceiling lights, or large windows that are directed towards alternately the city, the beguinage garden, or the intimate interior courtyards in the building. The geometrically shaped relief of the ceilings is not only decorative, but is also a technical solution for the flexible arrangement of lighting fixtures.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the description of the beguinage in the Flemish Inventory Immovable Heritage, available from <https://id.erfgoed.net/erfgoedobjecten/22113>

Where the difference between the old and new wing is clearly demarcated in the façades, the transition between old and new is much softer in the interior. The many similarities on the interior ensure that the passage from the new to the old wing happens, for an inattentive visitor, almost unnoticed. The most apparent contrast lies in the pristine condition of Wing 19 versus the marks of time and traces of former uses in Wing 58. Unavoidably, similar scarves and traces will appear on the floors, walls, and the refined details of the new building as well. Through time, the two wings will grow towards each other and will become even more familiar than they are at the moment.

Figure 3  
Plan of the  
museum, ground  
floor (Image by  
Shailja Patel)

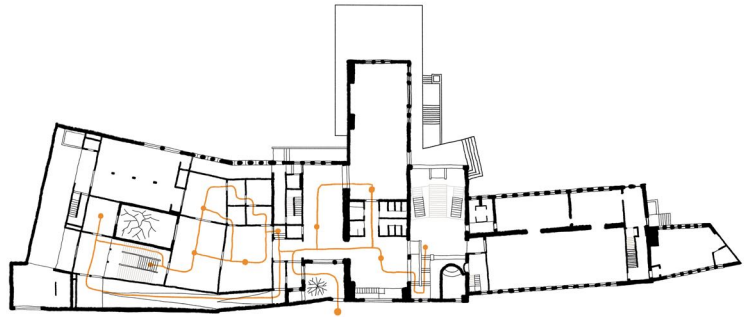
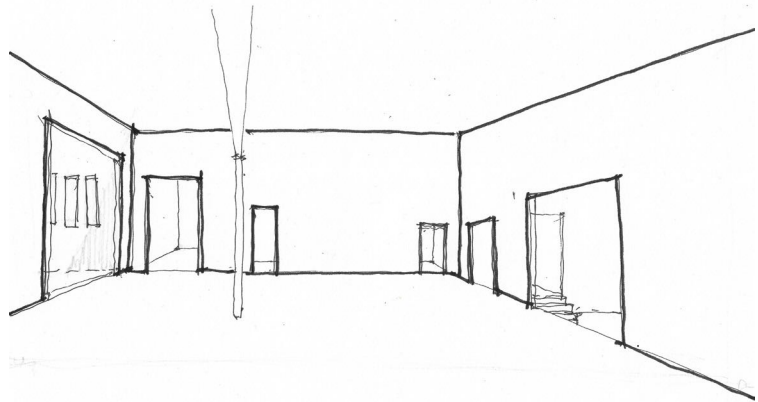


Figure 4  
Openings of  
varying  
sizes create  
ambiguous  
relations  
between  
different rooms  
(Image by Shailja  
Patel)



Where the axonometric plan of Wing 58 is characterised by modernist monumentality, the plan of Wing 19 is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, the new building has some monumental features as a grand staircase, spacious exhibition rooms, and skylights. On the other hand, the axes, symmetry, and perspectives are somehow distorted, and the plan lacks a clear hierarchy and sequential flow between the different rooms (Figure 3). Helen Rees Leahy (2005) argues that it has become common practice in the contemporary museum and gallery design to create spectacular interiors, which have a distractive and disorientating effect on the visitor and which

she believes conflicts with the museum's educational agenda. Although, the seemingly anamorphic plan of Wing 19 creates in some spots definitely a sense of disorientation and even alienation from the outside world, the plan also creates a great flexibility for curators to use the space in different ways. The plan invites us to explore the building through different paths and routes, reminding us of the plan of an organically grown historic city.

### ***Hortus Conclusus***

Besides borrowing elements from the design of the existing exhibition wing, Francesca Torzo also adopted the spatial form of the *hortus conclusus*, prominently present in the typology of the beguinage, in the plan of the building. The *hortus conclusus*, literally enclosed garden, refers to a garden typology enclosed by a fence, wall, building or dense vegetation (e.g. hedges). As the archetypal figure of the garden, it symbolises man's cultivation of nature in contrast with the inhospitable world outside. Apart from a spatial typology, the *hortus conclusus* is also used in poetry and visual arts as a metaphor for Paradise, the garden of Eden, or as a symbol for love and purity (Vande Keere & Plevoets, 2018). Because of its spatial and allegoric qualities, it served as a model for monastic architecture, with a series of buildings organised around a central cloister garden, often with a fountain in the center. Isolated from the outside world but open to the above, the garden invites for contemplation and prayer.

Aben and De Wit (1999) have distinguished three variations on the type, which serves a different program and symbolic meaning. The *hortus ludus*, or pleasure garden, serves as a place for social interaction and play; the *hortus catalogus*, contains a carefully selected and cultivated collection of plants (herbs, vegetables or flowers) and which beyond its practical use also symbolises knowledge and wealth; and the *hortus contemplationis*, or spiritual garden, serves as a place for reflection or prayer and is often not accessed but only looked at from the surrounding cloister. Apart from historic models, they argue that these three variations may inspire the reactivation of the contemporary (urban) landscape.

The various enclosed gardens of the site of the beguinage show characteristics of the three types described above (Figure 5). Its central square functions as a public garden for the city, while the smaller enclosed gardens in front of each house have a more intimate character and serve as a threshold between the collective

and the private sphere.<sup>4</sup> The new museum wing includes two interior courtyards or gardens. The first courtyard, just behind the entrance, buffers the museum's interior from the city. The elements that define this garden are very sober—one slender tree and a fountain—almost literally refer to the monastic spiritual gardens. The second garden is positioned in the centre of the building and is cultivated with rows of small plants and flowers, like an herb garden or flower bed (Figure 6).

Figure 5  
A series of enclosed gardens characterise the site (Image by Shailja Patel)

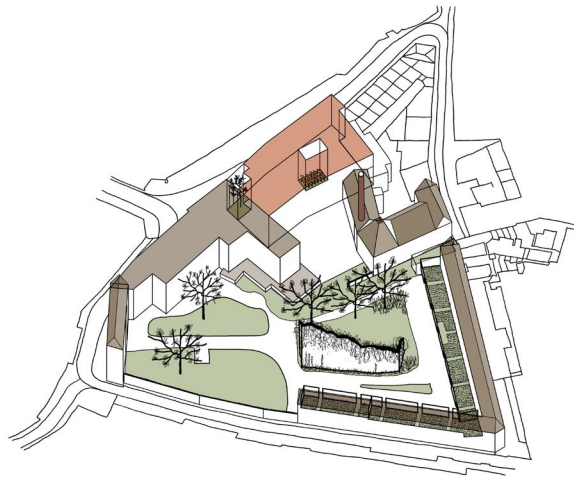
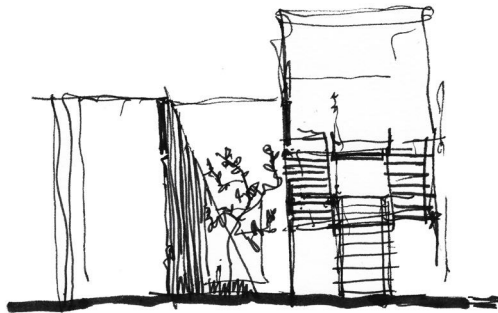


Figure 6  
An impression of the *hortus conclusus* in Wing 19 (Image by Shailja Patel)



The spatial organization of a museum around one or several enclosed gardens is not a new typology, but occurred frequently in the national museums built in the nineteenth century to serve the public accessibility of art and culture (Marotta, 2012). In the Munich Glyptothek (1830), the Royal Museum of Art and History in Brussels (1880) or the national gallery of modern and contemporary art in Rome (1883), these interior gardens are still preserved, although

<sup>4</sup> On the garden as a threshold between interior and exterior in domestic interiors, (see Klasto, 2019)



maybe not in all cases used to their potential. In the renovation of the Reina Sophia Museum in Madrid, the garden is accessible to the visitors to take a rest or stroll in between visiting the different sections of the museum. In other examples, these gardens have been sacrificed in recent renovations to extend the museum's exhibition spaces or to make room for additional amenities.

Unlike in the monumental, neoclassical museums, the inner gardens in Francesca Torzo's design are small and not accessible for the public. They instead serve as visual elements, a space for the mental retreat that invites introspection. The gardens also create a point of orientation for the visitor as they connect different rooms on both floors (Figure 7). Seen from specific angles, the composition of plants is framed as a *natura morta* (Figure 8). As such, the two enclosed gardens integrated into the museum combine the allegoric and spatial qualities of the *hortus conclusus*.



Figure 7  
The ground floor exhibition room with a view towards one of the inner gardens in the centre of the museum (Image by Shailja Patel)



Figure 8  
The flower bed, framed like a *natura morta* (left) and a view from the exhibition room on the first floor towards the former gin distillery and beguinage garden (right) (Images by Shailja Patel)

### Z33 as a Public Interior

The reopening of Z33 was planned for March 2020. The night of the opening, the country went into lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two months later, the museum opened under new conditions, following strict protocols that only allowed a limited number of visitors after online reservations. Performances, interactive workshops, or touching of objects and installations by visitors were prohibited. The museum does not have a permanent collection but only works with temporary exhibitions. For the opening, Z33 had three exhibitions: *The Time of Work*, *The Work of Time*, and *Birds of a Feather*. *The Time of Work* is conceived as an inauguration of Wing 19 in which the building itself is the theme and focus of the exhibition. It is an architectural exhibition in the sense that it aims to explore the potentialities and limitations of the building as an exhibitions space, but also of the building as an urban interior, a place for strolling, wandering, a place to retreat from the bustle of the city, a place to see and be seen, for social interaction and debate.

Under COVID-19 protocol, the solitary visitor—we were alone in the rooms nearly every time we visited the museum—gets the unique opportunity to explore the space as an architectural object, a place to retreat—a spiritual place almost—that is loaded with a sense of serenity and largely withdrawn from every-day life. Yet, Z33 does not want to be an institution that presents art in a sacral temple or ivory tower. The concept of the opening exhibition was not to expose the building as a piece of art or sacral space. Instead, many of the works and installations were actually meant to be interactive and fun, inviting the visitor to engage or to steer the debate.

Francesca Torzo's project for Z33 is more than just an extension to an existing exhibition building; instead, the project gives an entirely new appearance and meaning to the art institution. The new building does not show itself as an icon that stands out in sharp contrast with its environment, as many museums built in the last decades (Macleod, 2013). The massive façade and the new entrance "gate" at the street lend the art institute a solid and grounded character, but at the same time, it seamlessly integrates the museum in the image and structure of the city. By copying some of the qualities of the old wing in her design for the extension, Francesca Torzo renders the old building more cherished and valuable without making any invasive physical interventions. The same goes for the relation the building develops with the beguinage. Over the years, the beguinage got a somehow ambiguous form, especially its west side, where Wing 58 replaced the destroyed historic fabric. Francesca Torzo took the

opportunity to rethink the overall appearance of the beguinage, strengthening its quality as an enclosed public space—an intimate yet collective *hortus conclusus*.

The opening exhibition *The Time of Work* is genuinely innovative as an architectural exhibition. The experience of the exhibition under COVID-19 restrictions—with its untouchable objects, only to be observed in a passive mode—presents the building as an “art temple” rather than a “house” that Z33 wants to be. The layout and atmosphere of the building, both its exterior as interior seems, however, are capable of generating a sense of intimacy and familiarity that characterises a house, while at the same time creating a physical and intellectual link with the city. Unlike many museums or art institutions, Z33 does not have a fancy restaurant and exclusive shop, but has instead a *public living room*, furnished with simple sofas, chairs, and potted plants in the corners of the room. Visitors can drink here a coffee from the vending machine, students can eat their home-made sandwiches, or people can spend a few hours working or reading. A large terrace connects this room with the garden of the beguinage.

Lowering the threshold, in spatial terms as well as in economic and social terms, has been an important ambition for museums in the last decades (Gurian, 2005). The informal and non-commercial character of Z33’s amenities may contribute to this and create a more inclusive cultural institution. But as argued by Hill in *Actions of Architecture* (2003), architecture is made by both design and use. The success of the project and its meaning as a public interior can only be evaluated over time, when the building is actually used—when artists, curators, museum visitors and inhabitants of the city have claimed and appropriated the spaces, or as states by Macleod (2013) “when social being occupy social space” (p. 177). In a few years, the beguine houses, formerly used by Z33 for exhibitions, will house the Faculty of Architecture and Arts of Hasselt University. The Belgian office Bovenbouw with David Kohn Architects (UK) made the design for the transformation of the houses into studios, lecture rooms, and offices for researchers. A shallow pond within the contours of the ruin of the former church will strengthen the image of the romantic ruin as the focal point of the garden. The reopening of Z33 is only a first step into the regeneration of the beguinage as a cultural hub in the center of the Hasselt.

In *Building and Dwelling*, Sennett (2018) introduces the concept of the open city, a city that is not only convenient to live in, but also steers various forms of activities and interactions, and makes life also pleasant and exciting. Sennett describes that the morphology

of the open city should, therefore, have a porous membrane, spaces that allow an open flow between inside and outside, between public and more intimate spheres. This porous membrane lends the city resilience and the ability to absorb changes—like a sponge that can absorb water thanks to its porosity. Wolfrum in *The Porous City* (2018) elaborates on the important role of architecture to articulate and re-establish the morphology of the city, and hence the creation of the porous city. She argues that the production of porosity went hand in hand with the adaptation of existing spaces and intensive analysis of the context. In that respect, the converted beguinage in Hasselt is without a doubt an excellent example of a porous structure: its robust and distinct border, permeable through few openings that present itself as the gates to the enclosed public garden; the façades towards the garden are more open with vistas between the garden and museum.

The beguinage can be seen as a historic example of an ensemble that, although consisting of both indoor and outdoor spaces, functions as an interior: a place that is spatially and programmatically separated from the rest of the city. The addition of the new, contemporary building by Francesca Torzo restores the original footprint and boundary of the site and strengthens its original interior character. At the same time, its programme that combines a public park, an art museum and a school of architecture will generate an urban ambiance. Z33, and by extension the site of the beguinage, is illustrative for the ambiguous character of the public interior: while its outdoor spaces mainly function as an interior, and more specifically an *hortus conclusus*, the interior of the new building seems modeled as an organically grown urban pattern, a porous structure that can be permeated and explored through different paths.

### **Fieldnotes from Visiting Z33**

Our analysis is based on a series of site visits during the summer of 2020. These observations and analysis were recorded in a series of field notes. Figure 9 illustrates our analysis of the museum's position in its urban context. The notes record the incidence of light and the volumetric experience of the space. The notes reflect an observation recollecting different spatial experiences of museums visited in Utrecht (Centraal Museum) and Munich (Pinakothek Moderne). Figure 10 shows the experience of the entrance volume. Without any visual openings, the entrance volume retains the enclosed feeling until walking up to the end when this feeling is broken by the opening on the right at the end of the walk. Figure 11 illustrates a walk through the museum, observing different volumes in one

axis. Figure 12 shows the entrance of the museum, seen from the street and a plan of the small interior court yard that forms a buffer between the public street and the foyer of the museum.

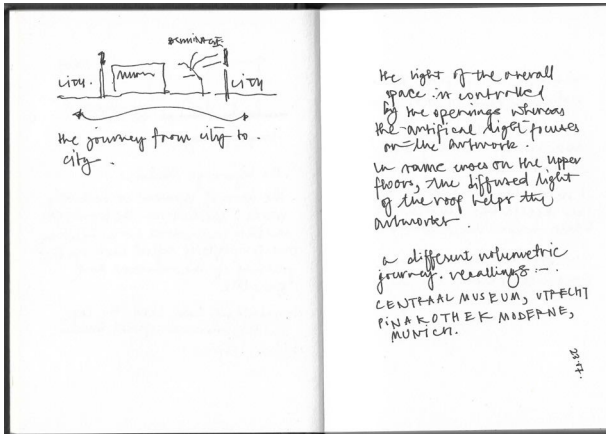


Figure 9  
Observation of the museum's position in its urban context (Image by Shailja Patel)

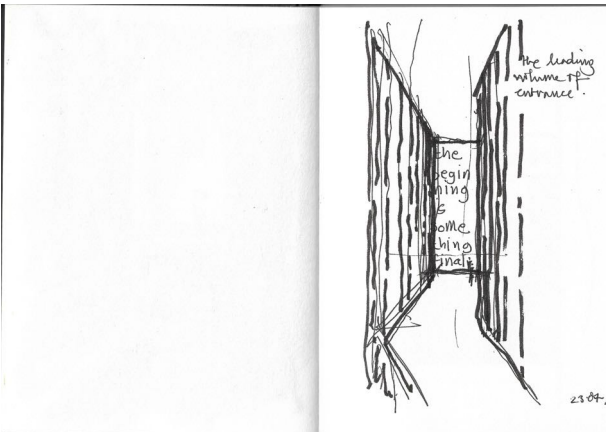


Figure 10  
Sketch of a high, narrow museum room, called 'the street' (Image by Shailja Patel)

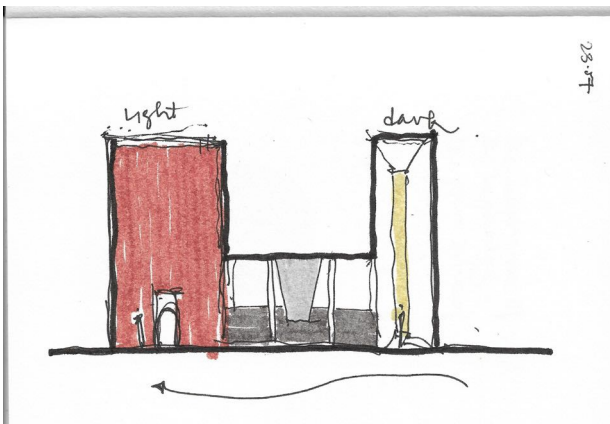
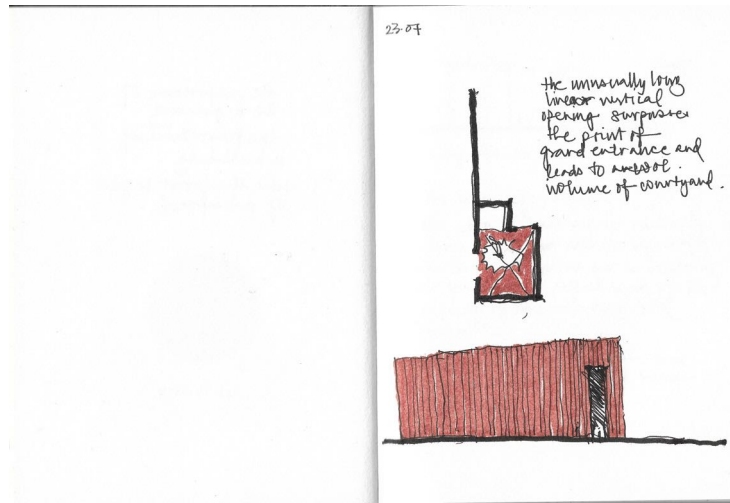


Figure 11  
An on-site observation of walking through different volumes in one axis (Image by Shailja Patel)

Figure 12  
The slit-like  
opening on a  
blank wall is  
countered by the  
courtyard (Image  
by Shailja Patel)



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