

Folio: Drawings

“I prefer drawing to talking. Drawing is faster and leaves less room for lies” —Le Corbusier

Essays

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Landscape and Object



Reviewer: PATRICIA CHIA

W Architects' design of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNHM) is an example of how *object* and *landscape*, two inherently contradictory typologies, can be reconciled. This essay explores the nature of this contradiction, particularly in the context of a natural history museum, and details how design can serve as a medium of resolution between the two. Three types of objects—the iconic object, the archival object and the design object, will be examined for their inherent contradictions. Architectural resolutions offered through three corresponding types of landscape—terrain, ecology and context, will be explained.

The Iconic Object

Every architectural project faces the question of how to situate a new intervention onto the existing site. In the case of the LKCNHM, the new museum block comprising galleries, offices, and classrooms has to negotiate the existing site, a small plot of land southeast of the NUS Museum, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM), and University Cultural Centre (UCC). This space used to be occupied by the NUS Office of Estate and Development (OED).

The Archival Object

More unique to this project is the three-way tension between over 500,000 preserved specimens of natural history, the unique ecological landscapes from which they were extracted, and the new conditions within which they will be preserved and displayed. The design needed to be able to house specimens of Southeast Asian flora and fauna dating back to the 1800s and dinosaur bones, all of which came from different ecological contexts, and required specific climatic conditions for preservation.

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The Design Object

Clients engage architects for their design services. Between the needs and preferences of the client, and the formal predilection of architects, there is more often than not, a gap where the two do not align. What is interesting about LKCNHM is that the client is an autonomous institution, and the design object is a building for the greater public. How this changes the dynamic between the two will be explored briefly.

The Iconic Object and the Landscaped Plaza

Whether driving past NUS on the Ayer Rajah Expressway (AYE), walking back from University Town through the covered walkway on College Link Road, or approaching the museum directly along Kent Ridge Crescent, the textured concrete “rock” mass that is LKCNHM cannot be missed. With the exception of the landscaped southern façade that fronts Kent Ridge Crescent, its faceted form and dark-coloured solid walls render it almost non-directional, allowing it to be perceived visually as a discrete object from all angles.

With the help of signs, one is directed to the main entrance, where glass doors framed in black steel reveal a colourful 12m x 4m mural collage of specimens from the museum’s collection. Upon entry, one notices at eye level a horizontal strip of stamp-sized¹ decals of white silhouettes of the various elevations of the museum—a subtle self-validation of the museum’s “iconic form”. A “rock” or a “tomb,” as directors of W Architects describe it, the form is a faceted solid with chamfered edges and no openings except for those required for labs, offices, and fire escapes. A deeper reading of the iconic form in relation to its architect reveals the key difference between a “Gehry” and what W Architects has produced—the firm’s “signature” lies in its design process rather than its form.

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- 1 The textured “rock mass” is perceived visually as a discrete object from all angles
- 2 The cliff landscape is formed by tiered planters with a variety of climbing plants, complemented by a range of low-growing shrubs and trees
- 3 Coastal landscape planting along the rear edge of the upper 1st storey; plants and shrubs commonly found in the beach area were selected
- 4 The faceted form and dark-coloured solid walls of the LKCNHM render it almost non-directional