

## Fair design

## Is there another way of doing this?

Five architects muse on what they would do differently to design the ultimate art fair

**W**e've created a monster! Out of humble beginnings in small halls visited solely by discreet dealers, altruistic-cum-monopolistic collectors and a handful of art aficionados have grown the Armory Show, Frieze, Tefaf and the Leviathan of them all, Art Basel, and its fire-breathing but Ray-Banned brother lounging on Miami Beach.

They're good, these fairs, but they're not great. They're good for galleries' bottom-lines but they're not great for gallerists' complexes—where's the natural light? They're good for experienced collectors renewing vows with their beloved art brands, but they're not great for the cautiously curious—where do you sit while pondering your purchase? And they're good for journalists in search of refreshment, but not so great for the public that sell these stadiums out—why is the food so bad? How did I end up in sector G3 again? Why didn't I hire an electric buggy for the day to get around?

And they're good for containing a dizzying array of art, but not so great at showing it. It's always a surprise that the art—made to question, provoke, to find a form that accommodates the mess—is usually just hung on a matt-white plywood wall.

Many fairs try—of course—but issues of cost and practicality tend to limit what is possible. But what might an architect's propelling pencil do to make the fair a bit fairer, a little sunnier, a little lighter on the feet and more appetising to the palate? *The Art Newspaper* spoke to five of the world's leading and most artistically-inclined architects to see how they would prevent fair fatigue and white-cube washout.

## Starchitect treatment

## Daniel Libeskind

"I'm against the notion that commercial spaces are different from exhibition and curatorial ones; the difference between high culture and pop culture is an old division. These spaces should allow art, commerce, people and activity to all flourish without the boundaries of 'what is art?' 'what is selling', 'what is enjoying being in a place?' You have to treat the public and the art with dignity and then think how people can access amenities, how to promote different scales of movement, how to mix big crowds with intimate spaces.

For me, there is no contradiction between creating an imaginative space and a space that works to sell art. But white walls all the same height? They're outdated—people have already seen better in museums and exhibitions. And art is more accessible if you have an inventive space.

Break out of the uniform formula: intervene, use different geometry, texture, light, acoustics. Fairs shouldn't mean you're condemned to monotony—they are places for looking, buying, meeting each other. You don't have to interfere with the price per square metre and the formula for selling art but the public spaces you can certainly change.

Some things deserve a classical display but restaurants, bars and meeting places should have their own exuberance—people should not be treated as objects that just move from booth to booth. People need variety to prevent fatigue, to have fun and live a bit."

## Naoto Fukasawa

"Within commercial spaces, there is a precondition that it somehow has to offer us a sense of our lifestyle. On the other hand non-commercial spaces—exhibitions and curated spaces that are based on an idea of a collection—do not have to show the same value. I don't feel there has to be a big difference between commercial spaces and exhibition spaces as such—it is more about how people want to show the objects; the difference in their purpose will make for a different way of communicating. So I do not think there is one standard way to showcase things. What is important is the interaction we have with the space. Lighting, flow of people and materials: they are all part of interacting with the space and with the art.

Architects should not focus just on the art that might hang at a fair nor just on making a pleasant social space. The fair design should also allow for artists to make projects there and then. Given spaces for artists to display their art itself



Tefaf, Maastricht, top, Art Basel Miami Beach, centre and Basel Satellite fair Volta, bottom

creates art. So the fair space should provide artists with some flexibility for them to work."

## Richard Meier

"I love designing museums because each has a different context. That should also be true of a fair—its context shouldn't be the same if it's in Basel or Paris or Miami Beach. You have to take the art and people into account. The museum is the cathedral of our time, people don't just go to experience the art but to experience other people experiencing art.

Taking people on a journey is very important, the space, the organisation of the spaces within, the structure. Once you set it up in a regular way you can have things that are irregular and that's good for a sense of discovery. You can spend hours at a fair but if you don't have a place to sit down it's going to be a shorter experience.

You have to think about light and space, you have to ask what it is you're doing here, what's hanging on the walls—it can't just be a series of open cubicles. You need milling space for people to get together outside of the proprietary spaces because that's part of what the art fair is all about—meeting people. It's remarkable to see what some people do with their spaces and that others don't bother.

For me, natural light is of primary importance but in the buildings where they hold art fairs, it's

tough. If there's no natural light you have no sense of direction. I went to Miami one year and I was always lost. With natural light you could create orientation spaces where people can congregate, so you can meet—maybe it's a café—then you know where you're going."

## David Kohn

"I think at the moment art fairs give a sense of the art being inside an envelope because the building and the infrastructure promote a weak, white cube idea. It says: 'you're no longer in the outside world, you're in an art space'—but it ends up feeling like a shopping mall.

Should there be such a clear boundary between the world and the art? I've enjoyed shows in church naves, pumping stations and disused underground stations because the context is changed. At the moment the white cube strategy is weakened because an art fair is just a city of them where you feel that you've been walking forever. The context gives you no pause. In cities we don't like endless, fascistic, regimented boulevards. We return to the parts of cities where there's difference and stimulation.

Maybe you'd work on the public spaces first and the entrances—breaking down the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Perhaps artist's work could influence the design and feel of their gallery space at the fair. It

would be more immersive, you'd see a constellation of pavilions or gardens; a much greater richness of the context the work lives in and an ambiguity between the art and the fair. And then one day, once you've done all these things someone will come along with a white cube again and it'll seem fresh."

## Rick Mather

"Fairs are temporary so they have to be very flexible. You have to make sure the space doesn't overwhelm the objects, too. But I don't see a major difference between fairs and museums—they're both like a stage set. When I design museums, I like to keep the stage simple and let the art speak for itself.

The sense of space and scale is very interesting. I remember when the National Gallery in London was remodelling and they put a lot of their works in the basement—they actually looked a lot better because they were painted for domestic interiors. Occasionally you see small pictures in huge surroundings and they look lost. Scale is very important and it works both ways, of course.

Long vistas work well and help enormously with large crowds of people. The two large ones we've just done, the Ashmolean in Oxford and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, you're led through the spaces very naturally. It's important that people don't think they're in a maze or stuck in the bottom of a battleship, that they can see where they're going and where they've been.

The restaurants and public places are really key—they should be a landmark, a focus and a way of orienting yourself in the building. Sometimes you see them shoved in a corner and that's too bad, they ought to be like a restaurant in a piazza with all roads leading towards it. Terraces are very good. Interaction with the outside is good.

I think the problem with the fairs is that all the spaces are the same size. Maybe you could put a space in the middle where the artists can contribute and then the galleries fan off this and lead towards a large area to eat and drink, so the dealers don't feel like they have dead spaces and the public are always circulating. The last thing you want is cultural fatigue, we've tried to do this with bigger spaces—different scales and sizes and heights and a view out—to give you a break. Everybody needs a break."

## Cost versus concept

It's clear that, for the architects, fairs represent well-meaning but missed opportunities to engage with the art and the audience. Physical and sensorial fatigue might be solved by interior architecture and layout that allows for a sense of discovery, while allowing for plenty of glass to let natural light in and afford a view out, which helps rest the eyes, anchor visitors geographically and lends context to place—whether it's a marquee in a London park or a Messeplatz in Switzerland.

When thinking of fairs and spaces that succeed in presenting art and objects with imagination and an eye on a sale, two very different examples come to mind. The Independent fair in the Dia building in New York's Chelsea was a deconstructed thing that felt like a show more than a fair, arranged sparingly over three big, airy floors where galleries' spaces seemed less delineated and strict and dealers weren't nervily marking their territory. Independent was a success and a pleasure. On the other hand, Tefaf, Maastricht's grand old lady of art and antiques is lauded for its opulence, its otherworldly displays and its high production values. Every year, the stand of collector and interior designer Axel Vervoordt represents a self-contained world curated with an eye to the heroically aesthetic and the healthily materialistic.

Of course, all of our architects, if given the job to overhaul an established art fair, would suddenly face the problems of the opposition becoming the government, necessitating juggling the two principal reasons that art fairs tend to look alike: cost and practicality. Boring both, but fairs still appear every year because they get their margins right. Just how right remains to be seen, though—if a sexy, well-designed upstart started up in an airy space in an enlightened city displaying art that brought smiles to the crowds as well as selling to the serious, you'd feel the breath of fresh air from Hong Kong to Miami Beach.

## Robert Bound



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