



ART MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE AS DISCOURSE: DIFFERENTIATING INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES IN ISTANBUL

BİR SÖYLEM OLARAK SANAT MÜZESİ MİMARLIĞI: İSTANBUL'DA KURUMSAL KİMLİKLERİN AYRIŞTIRILMASI

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Abstract

This study examines how three newly built art museums in Istanbul differentiate themselves through architectural discourse to reflect their institutional identities. The study highlights their negotiated place within Istanbul's cultural landscape by analyzing architectural narratives. Architecture actively constructs institutional identity and shapes visitor experiences rather than serving as a neutral container for art. A comparative analysis of architectural features and design strategies reveals that while all three museums emphasize transparency, accessibility, and public engagement, their architectural narratives diverge based on institutional structures. Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture, a state museum under Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, emphasizes urban memory and adaptive reuse to preserve Türkiye's artistic heritage. Istanbul Modern, supported by the Eczacıbaşı Group, presents itself as Turkey's first modern art museum, using transparency and site-specific design to connect with the urban landscape. Arter, backed by the Koç Group, defines itself as a cultural platform focused on inclusivity, permeability, and integration with the Dolapdere neighborhood. This study uses a qualitative comparative analysis method that includes content analysis of publications, interviews, press materials, architectural drawings and field observations to identify commonalities and differences in architectural discourse and uncover the rationales behind these choices.

Keywords: Art Museum Architecture, Institutional Identity, Architectural Discourse, Architectural Representation.

Öz

Bu çalışma, İstanbul'da yeni inşa edilen üç sanat müzesinin kurumsal kimliklerini yansıtmak için mimari söylem aracılığıyla kendilerini nasıl farklılaştırdıklarını incelemektedir. Çalışma, mimari anlatıları analiz ederek İstanbul'un kültürel manzarasındaki müzakere edilmiş yerlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Mimarlık, sanatı barındıran nötr bir yapı olmaktan öte, aktif olarak kurumsal kimlik inşa eder ve ziyaretçi deneyimlerini şekillendirir. Mimari özelliklerinin ve tasarım stratejilerinin karşılaştırmalı analizi, üç müzenin de şeffaflık, erişilebilirlik ve kamusal katılımı vurgulamasına rağmen mimari anlatılarının kurumsal yapıya dayalı olarak farklılaştığını ortaya koymaktadır. Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar Üniversitesi'ne bağlı bir devlet müzesi olan İstanbul Resim ve Heykel Müzesi, Türkiye'nin sanatsal mirasını korumak için kentsel hafızayı ve uyarlanabilir yeniden kullanımı vurgulamaktadır. Eczacıbaşı Grubu tarafından desteklenen İstanbul Modern, Türkiye'nin ilk modern sanat müzesi olarak şeffaflık ve mekâna özgü tasarım kullanarak kent dokusuyla bağ kurmaktadır. Koç Grubu tarafından desteklenen Arter ise kapsayıcılık, geçirgenlik ve Dolapdere semtiyle bütünleşmeye odaklanan bir kültürel platform olarak kendini tanımlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, yayınlar, röportajlar, basın materyalleri, mimari çizimler ve saha gözlemlerinin içerik analizini içeren nitel karşılaştırmalı analiz yöntemi kullanmaktadır. Çalışma, mimari söylemdeki ortaklıkları ve farklılıkları belirleyerek bu tercihlerin ardındaki gerekçeleri ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sanat Müzesi Mimarisi, Kurumsal Kimlik, Mimarlık Söylemi, Mimarlık Temsili.



INTRODUCTION

The architecture of art museums has become a competitive element today. The museums compete in terms of architectural design, aesthetic appeal, and the ability to redefine the museum experience. While museums used to focus on studying and preserving art, today, they have become multifaceted spaces that appeal to different audiences' diverse needs and expectations (Verhagen, 2021). At the same time, museum architecture is not just a passive background but a strategic tool institutions use to assert authority and strengthen their cultural position (Jones & MacLeod, 2016). Whether affiliated with a government institution or a private company, museum architecture reflects and reinforces the institution's broader strategic position. In her work, *Privatizing Culture*, Wu (2002) discusses how companies and institutions strategically use art and architecture for self-promotion, often reinforcing existing power structures. Through the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao, Wu critically examines how the Basque government leveraged museum architecture to rebrand the region while questioning whether the museum itself acts as “*a modern Iberian outpost of American artistic colonialism.*” (p. 289). This illustrates how museum architecture can serve both as a tool for local identity-building and as a mechanism for cultural dominance on a global scale. Thus, institutions aim to foster more robust public engagement through a compelling architectural experience. However, it would be an oversimplification to attribute this solely to architectural design. Sharon Macdonald (2006, p. 220) describes the museum as an “intricate dance between context, content, space, and visitors that is choreographed via architecture,” underscoring the complex interplay between physical space and many other actors. In addition, the intentions and values expressed through a museum's architecture are crucial to understanding museums. Jones and MacLeod (2016) emphasize that museum architecture plays a central role in “claims-making about the social world” (p. 208), shaping public perception and influencing how institutional narratives are communicated.

The relationship between museum architecture, institutional identity, and urban transformation has been the subject of several studies, particularly in cities with growing cultural sectors like Los Angeles. In her research, Behner (2003) highlighted how contemporary art museums in Los Angeles utilize architecture to express their institutional identities and claim their cultural positions. Similarly, Federman (2013) criticizes the assumed neutrality of museums. She argues that their spatial arrangements reflect power structures and ideological constructs. These studies show that museum architecture shapes cultural hierarchies, visitor engagement, and urban representation within a city's broader cultural landscape. Yet, despite the increasing importance of art museums in Istanbul, comparative studies analyzing their architectural discourse appear to be scarce. This study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how museum architecture functions as a discursive and strategic tool by examining how leading contemporary museums in Istanbul construct their institutional narratives through architectural design.

Since the early 2000s, Istanbul has become active in contemporary and modern art museology, with institutions such as Arter, IMPS, and IMM playing a key role. Despite this rapid institutional expansion, these museums' architectural narratives and spatial strategies remain understudied in a comparative framework. As Istanbul gains importance as a cultural center, it becomes increasingly important to understand how its museums differ architecturally, as it is used as a language to “*recognize and affirm some identities, and omits to recognize and affirm others.*” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 4).

This study addresses this gap and questions how these institutions use architectural design to differentiate their institutional identities. As exploring this question, it examines the specific architectural elements each museum emphasizes, from transparency and spatial fluidity to urban integration. It analyzes how these choices contribute to each museum's unique narrative. While investigating where these institutions' architectural strategies overlap -particularly in their shared goals of accessibility, public engagement, and community integration, it compares their architectural discourse. In doing so, it provides a deeper understanding of how contemporary museum architecture in Istanbul actively constructs institutional identity and mediates audience interaction within a rapidly evolving cultural landscape.

Architectural historian Spiro Kostof (1995, p. 7) highlights the inherently social nature of architecture, stating: “*...the identity of the patrons, particulars about the motivation for the buildings commissioned,*

the identity and careers of the architects, the nature of the materials of construction and their provenance, matters of finance, and so on... It is a social act - social both in method and purpose." This perspective emphasizes how architectural design reflects broader social, economic, and institutional dynamics. Building on this, Duman (2022) describes architectural practice as a social process originating from micro-level relationships and practices while influencing and being influenced by macro-level dynamics such as society, technology, and economic structures.

If all buildings are social acts, museums, due to their *raison d'être*, are undeniably social endeavors. As Behner (2003, p. 1) notes, museums are *"important examples of the intentional use of architecture for the representation of broad cultural ideals."* These ideals are shaped by their physical location, the institutions' narratives, and their connection to the surrounding community. These frameworks are particularly relevant for museums, where institutional goals inform architectural choices and actively shape public perceptions, societal roles, and the museum's cultural narrative.

While the reciprocity of the relationships directly shapes the museum's purpose, it also shapes the architecture of the museum. Whether a museum is a national museum funded by the government or a private museum funded by corporate entities, the museum's architecture inherently reflects the values and goals of its funding sources, shaping its public image and determining the experiences and demographics it aims to attract. As a result, architecture becomes a physical manifestation of a museum's narrative and mission, reflecting its ethos and aspirations. Understanding whether the architecture in an art museum network is successfully achieving its intended goals or fulfilling its specific roles will not be sufficient to examine the physicality of the architecture alone, as architecture affects and is affected by the social context (Reichmann & Müller, 2015). Therefore, the discourses of institutions should also be examined, and the manifestation of these discourses within architecture should be discussed¹.

METHOD

A multi-layered methodological approach was adopted in this study (figure 1). This approach addresses a complex issue, such as the expression of institutional identities of three art museums through architectural discourse in a more nuanced manner.

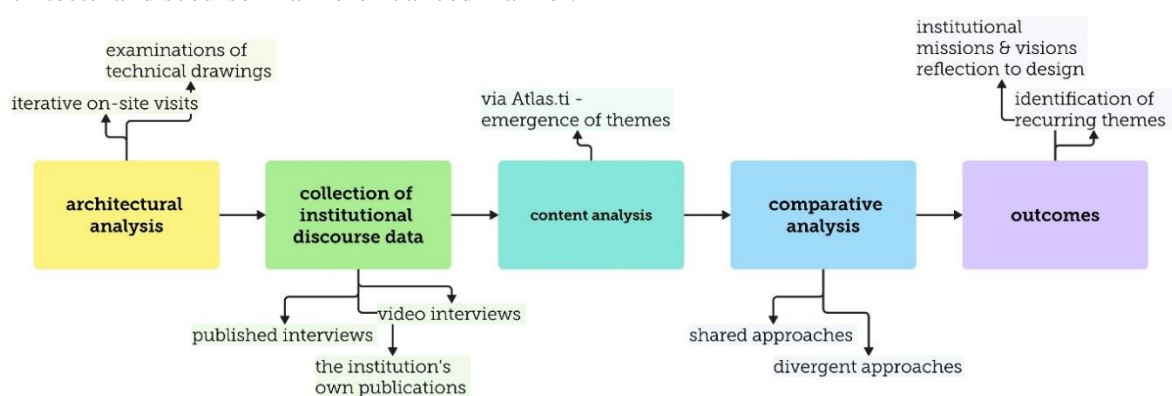


Figure 1. Method chart

The study focused on long-standing art institutions that recently moved to new, purpose-built facilities to reflect their evolving institutional discourses: Istanbul Painting and Sculpture Museum (IMPS) (est. 1937, relocated in 2021), Istanbul Modern (IMM) (est. 2004, relocated in 2023), and Arter (est. 2010, relocated in 2019). These museums were selected based on three main criteria: (1) their recent move to newly designed facilities specifically designed for their purpose and ideology, which allows for the examination of contemporary museum architecture, (2) their different institutional structures (state-funded or funded by corporations with different approaches) that shape their architectural discourse, and (3) their important roles in the evolving cultural landscape of Istanbul. This selection ensures that the study captures variations in institutional identity expression through architecture.

¹ This paper is derived from a doctoral research project focused on the art museum network in Istanbul. The broader study thoroughly examines visitor experiences, analyzing how they engage with institutional discourses and architectural spaces. Further discussions and additional findings are available in the original research.

Data collection involved a systematic analysis of various primary and secondary sources – including publications, video interviews, press materials, and technical architectural drawings. The sources included museums' own publications obtained from their museum stores and libraries, architectural journals and newspapers, websites of architecture firms, as well as their and the museums' social media accounts. Additionally, on-site visits to each museum provided direct observation of architectural elements, spatial organization, and visitor interaction.

A content analysis was conducted using qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti, in order to code the data and find commonalities and differences. In the first step, initial codes emerged to make descriptive coding, summarizing what the data meant. Subsequently, codes were re-analyzed in several cycles, and the patterns of the codes were reinvestigated. Finally, codes were piled under categories or sub-categories to establish an overview of the organizations' narratives' recurring themes. Atlas.ti facilitated co-occurrence analysis, word frequency analysis, and network visualization, which helped reveal underlying patterns in the data. The software also enabled the construction of a discourse table, where key institutional narratives were mapped according to thematic categories. Technical drawings and architectural analyses of spatial designs supported these findings. This provided a deeper understanding of how architectural choices aligned with institutional missions, funding structures, and target audiences.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis across the three museums highlighted common themes such as transparency, accessibility, and urban integration while highlighting fundamental differences rooted in the museums' specific institutional contexts. Based on the themes that emerged as a result of the analysis, museums were compared under the headings of 'main narrative and purpose', 'design ideas & starting points', 'city-location narratives', 'visitor narratives', 'transparency narratives', 'internationality', and 'safety concerns'. This comprehensive methodology facilitated a detailed examination of each museum and illuminated how contemporary museum architecture in Istanbul manages the interaction between institutional identity, urban context, and public participation.

FINDINGS: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT & ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGIES

Architectural Analysis

Istanbul Museum of Painting and Sculpture

Established in 1937 under Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, IMPS is Türkiye's first art museum, aimed at preserving and exhibiting Turkish art while supporting artistic training (Köksal, 2021). The collection dates back to the 19th century and comprises around 12,000 works. Ayşe Köksal (2022) indicates that IMPS serves as a repository of Türkiye's artistic heritage and its broader historical narrative.

After its establishment in the Crown Prince's office in Dolmabahçe Palaces, the museum endured multiple closures and reopenings for various reasons such as war, fire hazards, and restoration. It remained open intermittently for 31 years, from 1937 to 2021. Finally, the collection moved to Entrepot No. 5 in the Tophane region and opened to the public in its location at the end of 2021 (figure 2). Approaching the museum from the Beşiktaş neighborhood region, visitors first encounter Mimar Sinan University, the museum's patron, followed by Galataport Istanbul. The museum is rebuilt as a part of the Galataport project, a mega urban transformation project that spawns over 1.2 km of the Bosphorus coastline. The project consisted of the regeneration of the Fındıklı, Tophane and Karaköy axis. It aimed to create a cruise port and multi-purpose complex as a shopping district and a culture and art destination (Galataport, n.d.).



Figure 2. IMPS street side view (Pintos, 2022) Photo by Thomas Mayer.

The design repurposed two adjacent buildings, previously used by the Coast Guard and as a port entrepot. Since the design of these buildings belongs to the renowned Turkish architect Sedat Hakkı Eldem, with the architect's and the previous rectorate's consensus, these two buildings decided to be adapted and reused (Arkitera.com, 2022). The Directorate building's interior was emptied to create a vertical circulation zone and eliminate the level differences between the two buildings (figure 3). The directorate facade was reconstructed precisely the same, with its original iconic blue glass tile and repetitive rows of rectangular windows. This atrium space and its rectangular windows allow visitors to visually connect with Meclis-i Mebusan Street (the Galataport is between this street and the sea). The visitors see the surroundings from different perspectives while circulating on the ground floor and while rising in the vertical circulation.

The Entrepot building is stripped to its griddle structure and dressed with glass facades (figure 4). Ship container-inspired spaces suspended inside the three-dimensional griddle structure. This approach lets visitors experience the grid structure and container galleries separate from the surrounding walls. This is especially felt at night when the containers are illuminated in red. The containers are covered with perforated metal panels, and lighting is added between the panels and the interior. Lights amplify their double-facade design's effect and foster a sense of spatial depth.

The containers serve as chronologically arranged exhibition spaces, most designed to be interconnected. The galleries are numbered to indicate the order of the exhibition for the visitors (figure 5). Additionally, arrows have been added to support navigating the visitors. In circulation areas outside the container galleries -which have impermeable facades that cut off all connections to the outside- visitors are allowed to see the surroundings while circulating between the containers due to the transparent feature of the glass facades. Since these circulation areas are designed as thin bridges, they also provide visual communication with the spaces below and above (figure 6). The balconies added to each floor on the sides of the circulation areas face the vertical circulation in the atrium, and the gallery space provides the opportunity to stop on the floors and examine the street.



Figure 3. Entrance atrium. Photo by authors.



Figure 4. Facade view from the Tophane square side (Pintos, 2022) Photo by Thomas Mayer.



Figure 5. Circulation areas between container galleries (Pintos, 2022) Photo by Thomas Mayer.

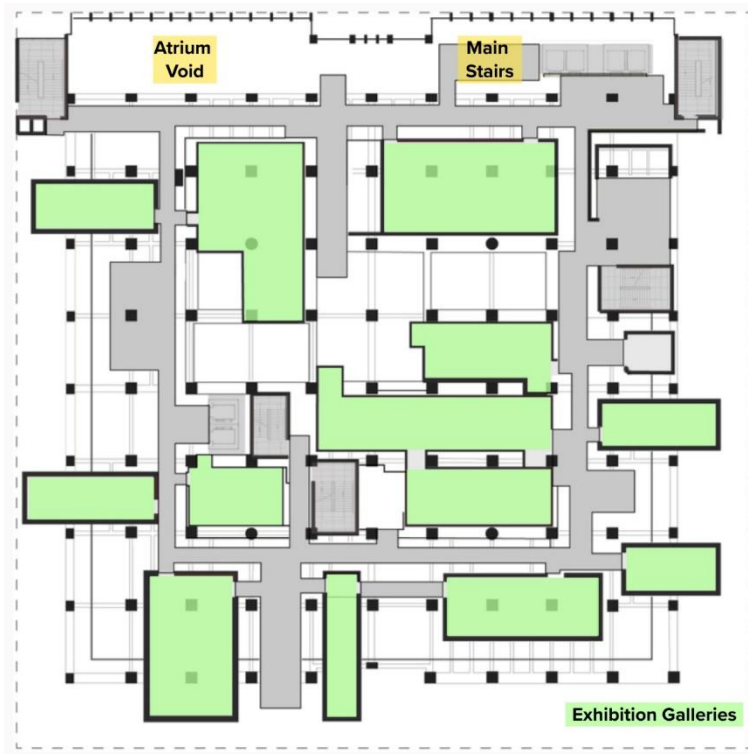


Figure 6. IMPS's second-floor plan (Pintos, 2022).

Transparency of the facade becomes more effective on the ground level. Functions not open to visitors are concentrated in the middle of the building and designed to be opaque (except for the sculpture and painting studio). Visitors pass through security from the street and first encounter the ticket office and cloakroom, then reach the open-plan museum store. From there, they proceed to the museum entrance, which opens directly to Galataport, and after seeing the workshops, they reach the museum cafe (a cafe owned by a coffee shop chain.) and finally -next to the cafe- museum staff offices. As visitors move

through this promenade, they are presented with the views of the upper levels and facades of the container galleries along with the Tophane Square located next to the museum and even IMM. The street and Galataport exit axis establishes a direct relationship with the outside environment. The cafe is also directly connected to the busy streets of the Galataport, so it functions as a part of the street. Moreover, the ground floor is open to the public and can be used without purchasing tickets.

Istanbul Modern

IMM's history started in 1987 when Nejat Eczacıbaşı envisioned a permanent modern art museum in Istanbul. This decision was ignited after the success of the 1st International Contemporary Art Exhibition (the Istanbul Biennial). This vision took shape in 2003 with the conversion of Entrepot No. 4 (in Tophane) into a museum space by the design of Tabanlıoğlu Architects. After opening in December 2004, the museum operated here for 14 years². It moved to its temporary location in Beyoğlu before moving back to its original site with the design of the renowned architect Renzo Piano in 2023. Piano was chosen for his expertise in museum architecture and for creating a venue to reach a world-class level (Eczacıbaşı, 2024). Since 2007, IMM has collaborated with the world-famous Centre Georges Pompidou, influencing its design and education programs. As Renzo Piano is one of the architects of Pompidou, his selection for the museum could not be a coincidence.

IMM sits between the Tophane Square and the Bosphorus, offering a panoramic view of Istanbul while neighboring IMPS across the square (figure 7). The museum is elevated 65 cm above the square via several steps, and the ground floor is designed to be transparent, visually connecting the square, the museum, and the Bosphorus. The ground floor offers unrestricted - and ticketless - access to public spaces such as the cafe, library, and educational areas. The short facades showcase large cross-braced columns supporting the third floor and feature grouped ventilation shafts that ventilate parking spaces underneath. The museum is divided horizontally into three volumetric parts: a transparent ground floor, a second level, and a third level that extends outward, providing shelter over the outdoor café, workshops, and public area on the ground level. The architect explains the raised main volume - expanding horizontally on the upper floors - supported by the transparent ground floor as “a flying vessel right on the water” (Vatican News - English, 2023). The transparent ground floor houses rounded columns and mechanical funnels aiming less sharp shadows for the visitors (figures 8 & 9).



Figure 7. IMM & Historical Peninsula (Pintos, 2023), Photo by Enrico Cano

² The opening had a great impact not only in the art world but also in the political and economic arena (Ceylanlı, 2024).

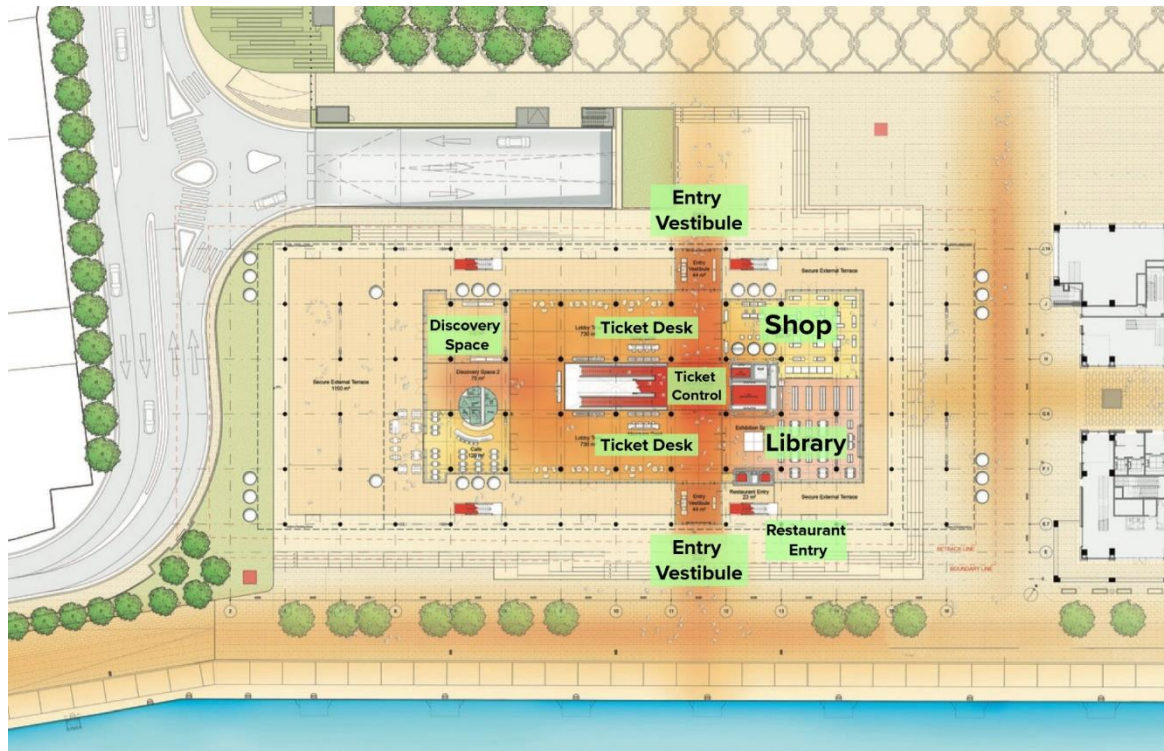


Figure 8. Ground Floor Plan of IMM (Pintos, 2023)

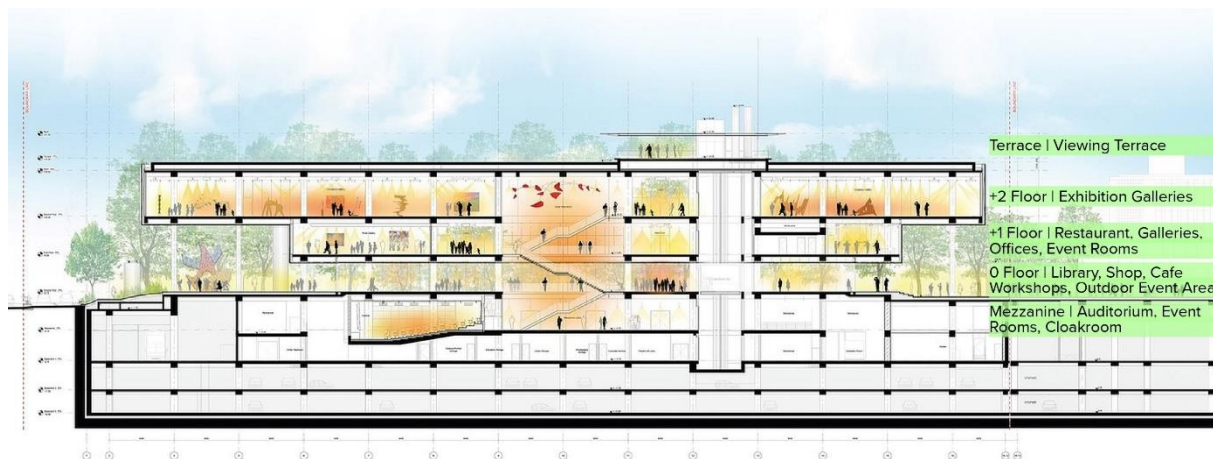


Figure 9. Longitudinal Section of IMM (Pintos, 2023)

The grey-colored 300 concave and convex aluminum modules on the facade interact with the changing light of the Bosphorus, resembled by the architect “a fish leaping out of the water” aiming to make a stronger connection to the location’s maritime past (Piano et al., 2021). Galvanized steel stairs and walkways attached to the facade are used for practical reasons (fire exit, event area, etc.) while also creating unity with the overall design language of the facade. The choices of materials for the facade elements - aluminum, steel - and their light grey colors reflect the site’s historical and contextual significance, maintaining an industrial concept.

The low steps surrounding the building offer seating and gathering areas outside the museum. They start from the security entrance, pass in front of the glass facade of the museum shop and library (also the museum staff offices above on the second floor), and then stretch through the museum’s Bosphorus-facing facade, offering views of the interior of the museum along with one-of-a-kind Istanbul and the sea view. This situation changes when a cruise ship parks in front of the museum. Due to the ship’s enormous size, all or most of the views this unique location offers become the steel body of the ship.

The ground floor consists of a central staircase that organizes circulation across the museum's three levels (figure 10). Auxiliary spaces are placed on the facades after leaving a foyer area around this staircase. The ticket desks in front of the staircase welcome visitors right after both security entrances on the square and sea entrances. The basement level includes a cloakroom, a 156-seat auditorium-cinema, restrooms and event rooms, and a landing lobby as a foyer.

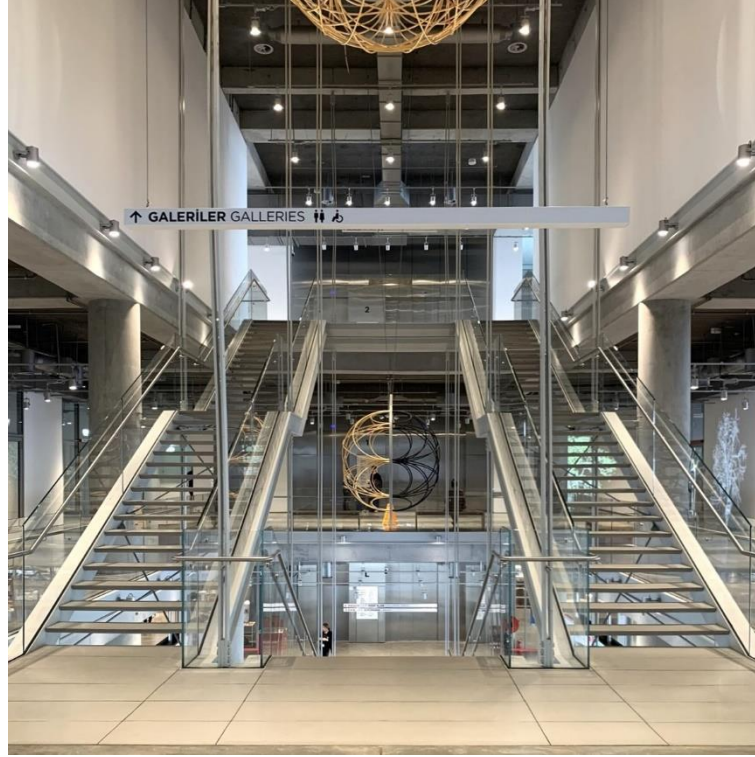


Figure 10. Staircase view from the first floor. Photo by authors.

The first-floor and the second-floor landing lobbies offer a view of Bosphorus and the square from both ends, maintaining a visual connection with the surroundings (figure 11). The first floor comprises galleries, event rooms, education spaces, staff offices, and a restaurant. The seaside restaurant features a transparent facade and a metal balcony overlooking the Bosphorus. An external staircase allows visitors to enter the restaurant separately while its landing extends to an open dining area.

The rhythmically repeated full-length windows are incorporated into the exhibition spaces to let natural light and exterior views permeate the galleries. When required, blackout curtains allow controlled lighting and provide space for installations such as video art. These wide, high-ceilinged spaces can adapt to diverse artworks and needs.

The stairs for the viewing terrace are located on the second floor (figure 12). Here, there is the 5 cm deep Reflection Pool, which can be considered the museum's trademark space, a covered pavilion that the staircase comes out of, and a terrace bar that hasn't yet been operating. The materials used on the terrace are in harmony with the Bosphorus's colors. They mimic and extend the sea and sky. The reflection pool is added to enhance this effect and create a visual extension of the Bosphorus by reflecting the surroundings in the water. Moreover, the terrace offers panoramic views of Istanbul's landmarks, including the historic peninsula and Galata Tower. Thus, the pavilion, which serves as both an observatory and a leisure area, completes the experience by offering visitors a connection with the city view.

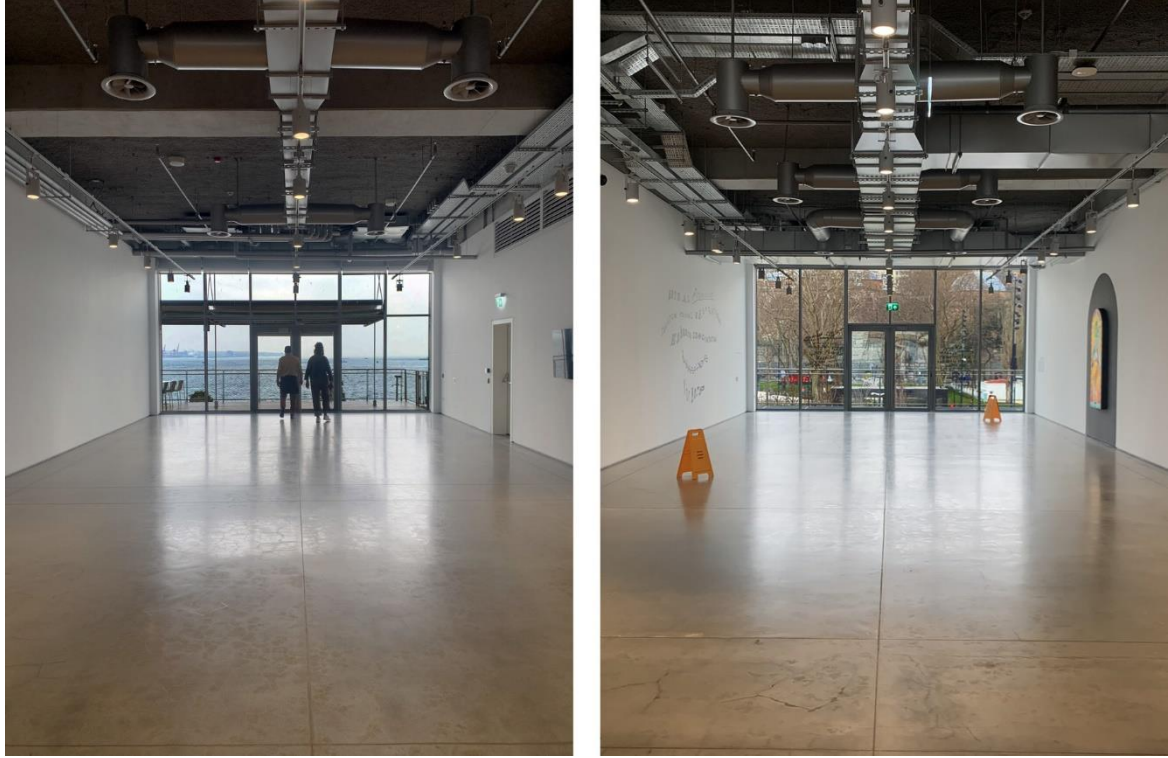


Figure 11. Views from both ends of the landing lobby. Photo by authors.



Figure 12. Reflection terrace of IMM. Photo by authors.

Arter

The Meymaret Han building in Beyoğlu housed Arter since Arter's establishment in 2010 by the Vehbi Koç Foundation (VKF). The museum defined this 800 square meter area, which they accepted as a temporary location, as a testing ground for the institution's vision for their actual space in the Dolapdere neighborhood (Baliç, Fereli & Evren, 2021 & Arter, 2019). After abandoning the idea of developing a

campus museum complex in the Golden Horn, combining Arter and the Sadberk Hanım Museum (the Museum is the first private museum in Turkey and is affiliated with VKF), the foundation decided on the Oto Koç building in Dolapdere (personal communication with Melih Fereli). The building was donated to the Foundation by the Koç family. The Vehbi Koç Foundation is directly linked to the Koç Family and the Koç Group. Founded in 1928 by Vehbi Koç, Otokoç Koç is Koç Holding's first venture in the automotive sector.

Although Dolapdere is a dense, industrial neighborhood with minimal public transportation, its proximity to Taksim, a touristic and crowded area, and the potential for revitalization made it a viable option. Even though adapting the existing building was an option, the foundation decided to demolish the old building and construct a new one that accommodated contemporary art needs (personal communication with Melih Fereli). Grimshaw Architecture was selected as the winner of the museum's design competition, which had invited proposals from renowned architectural firms. The firm completed the project in 2019, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Vehbi Koç Foundation.

Arter's relocation to Dolapdere has had significant implications for the neighborhood. Dolapdere and the adjacent Tarlabası district were previously perceived as areas associated with notions of danger or deprivation, but now it is related to urban transformation (Arıcan, 2020). Arter's presence here brought private businesses like hotels and art galleries - Dirimart, Pilevneli, Evliyagil Dolapdere (currently closed). Fereli noted that the museum's arrival in Dolapdere encouraged some locals to remain here and be thankful due to rising real estate prices in the neighborhood. Nevertheless, Dolapdere still lacks public transportation and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, which becomes a big challenge for accessibility. The neighborhood's industrial character plays a big part in this challenge, with the car repair shops and construction material stores using the sidewalks.

Arter's design creates two public squares -front and rear squares- in this dense urban fabric, connected through its transparent facade (figure 13). It brings attention to the neighborhood from the main arterial road in front of the building, aiming to integrate the interior into its urban surroundings. The front facade breaks in, pulls inwards, and sustains its transparency on the upper floors, further allowing the connection between the rear. A shallow pool and extended seating divide the public area with the museum's security-controlled area, not interfering with the transparency of the ground floor. The security kiosk added at the end of the seating moves away from the facade, letting people walk past this area and experience the building. The building features a three-dimensional diamond-shaped, patterned facade created from glass fiber-reinforced concrete with glazed finishes. The pattern becomes permeable in places, increasing the relationship between the interior and the exterior (figure 14).

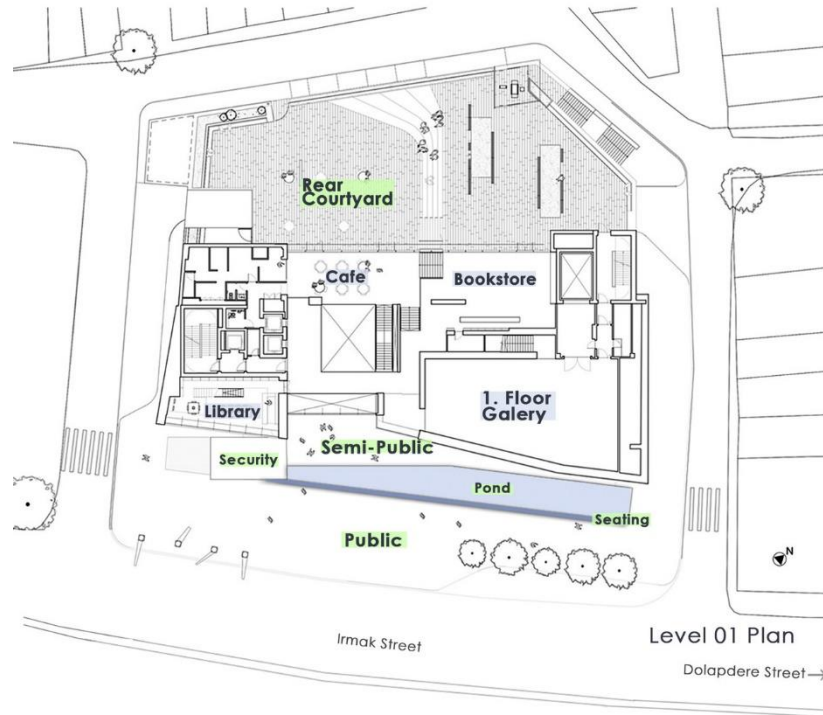


Figure 13. Arter first floor plan (Pintos, 2020). Manipulated by the authors.



Figure 14. Arter's view from the Irmak Street (Pintos, 2020). Photo by Quintin Lake.

The ground floor features a three-story high entrance atrium, offering views of the busy street, bistro, and bookstore located on upper levels (Figures 15 & 16). Here, A free-entry gallery provides direct visual access to the street. Auxiliary spaces such as the bistro, rear garden, bookstore, and library are situated on the first and the second floors, all accessible without a ticket. These free areas are all centrally located near the entrance, and they are interconnected. These spaces and the foyer areas spanning three subterranean levels, the second-floor exhibition space, are vertically linked to this central atrium that extends across seven levels. It creates ongoing visual flow throughout the interior of the museum.



Figure 15. View of the entrance lobby from the first floor (Pintos, 2020). Photo by Quintin Lake.



Figure 16. View of the bistro from the second floor (Pintos, 2020). Photo by Quintin Lake.

The bistro and the one-level above bookstore overlook the rear garden and the backstreet of Dolapdere. Visitors using these areas or sitting in the garden can observe the daily life of the locals, hanging their clothes to dry, chatting between windows, or watching children of the neighborhood play football. Consisting of a two-story space with wall-to-wall bookshelves, the second-floor library features a facade with a permeable version of the three-dimensional cladding that allows natural light to filter in while offering neighborhood views. The library and the bookstore offer Arter's publications that accompany the exhibitions.

The exhibition areas extend across seven levels and are intended to be adaptable, supporting various forms of artistic expression. Two main atriums, 25 and 17 meters in height, link these areas and create visual connections between the different levels, enabling visitors to view both the artworks and one another (figure 17). These atriums also bring natural light into the interior. Fluid circulation and well-placed interior openings simplify navigation, while facade openings offer views of Dolapdere, fostering interaction between the interior and exterior environments (figure 18). The underground performance spaces (-3rd floor) include Karbon Hall for multimedia art and Sevgi Gönül Auditorium with versatile seating. Both share a landing lobby located below the gallery space, which is connected to the entrance lobby. This feature allows the deep basement to be bright and more inviting.



Figure 17. Section of Arter, Visual Connection Diagram. (Pintos, 2020) Manipulated by the authors.



Figure 18. Interior & exterior facade openings (Pintos, 2020). Photo by Quintin Lake.

DISCUSSION

IMPS is a state museum affiliated with Mimar Sinan Fine Art University, while IMM and Arter are backed by prominent corporations like Eczacıbaşı Group and Koç Group. This difference in state versus corporate support significantly influences how these museums present themselves to the public. Institutional ideologies shape decisions regarding board members, curators, architects, and even the intended audience, reflecting each institution's unique identity through its architecture.

IMPS focuses on preserving and presenting the nation's art heritage, while IMM and Arter aim to stand out in a competitive cultural landscape by aligning their architecture and discourse with the values of their corporate sponsors. This creates soft power for their patrons while establishing a distinct identity. IMPS, meanwhile, faces the challenge of engaging visitors while maintaining its role as a custodian of cultural heritage.

To examine the institutional discourses of these museums, interviews with representatives (e.g., patrons, architects, and curators) and analysis of published materials were conducted. Each museum's recurring phrases to describe itself were identified and grouped into thematic categories. Institutions use these themes to reflect the core values and priorities to express their identity and engage with their chosen audiences. The categorized statements of the institutions were arranged in a table (table 1), providing a clear comparative framework for understanding how each museum positions itself in the cultural landscape of Istanbul.

Table 1. Table of Discourses

	IMPS		IMM		ARTER		
	(About the Museum IRHM, n.d.) (Akbank Sanat, 2016) (Arkitera.com, 2022) (EAA, n.d.) (Mimar Sinan Güzel Sanatlar Üniversitesi, 2021) (Müzecilik Meslek Kuruluşu Derneği, 2022) (RIBA Architecture, 2019) (Yüksel, n.d.)		(Akbank Sanat, 2022) (Belcher, 2023) (Eczacıbaşı, 2023) (Eczacıbaşı, 2024) (Emden & Yıldız, 2023) (Harris, 2023) (Istanbul Modern, n.d.-a) (Istanbul Modern, n.d.-b) (Merlo, 2023) (Ntv Program, 2023) (Piano et al., 2021) (Renzo Piano Building Workshop, 2023) (Showcase, 2023) (Vatican News, 2023)		(Altunok, 2019) (Art50, 2021) (Arter, n.d.) (Arter, 2019) (Baliç et al., 2021) (Ezic, 2021) (Fereli & Baliç, 2019) (Grimshaw, 2021) (Habertürk TV, 2019) (Woman TV, 2019)		
Patronship	State / University		Eczacıbaşı support		Koç Group support		
Main Narrative & Purpose	Türkiye's art memory	most important collection of Türkiye	Türkiye's 1st modern and contemporary art museum	duty to contribute to the development of society	cultural platform - not a museum.	"It is our duty" - slogan	sustainable art institution
	protect Türkiye's art	Being an example of a big urban transformation	popularize modern & contemporary art		contribute to the development & production of contemporary art	focus first on the artist (main actor) and audience	
Design Idea & Starting Point	urban memory	industrial past - harbor area	solid and flying design	multiple planes	permeability	fluidity	openness
	Entrepot - storage mechanism	adaptive reuse	elegant but industrial feel	ship sailing on the Bosphorus	designing the void / designing through sections	environmentally friendly	human-scaled
	creating a break between galleries & circulation	3D grid	simple form	Bosphorus - water and its reflectiveness	dynamism	a design that doesn't compete with the content	unpretentious
City - Location Narrative	creating a relationship with the city	showing the area's identity	interaction with the urbanscape - sea and land	a visual connection to the city	strong bond with the city	dialogue with Dolapdere and the city	a building that is of its setting
	center of the city	creating framed views	accessible waterfront promenade	creating a connection with the water-front and square			
Visitor	meeting point	social permeability	a place where people meet	visitor-oriented	artistic & social meeting point	invite and embrace	accessible price policy
			open & accessible		accessible for everyone	free exhibition	free auxiliary areas
Transparency	transparent/permeable ground floor	transparency to create a bond with the surrounding	transparent ground floor	raised from the ground - hanged in the air - <i>lightness</i>	transparent building	extrovert	
International			International partnerships	Piano most accomplished museum arc. / a world-class building	International partnerships	to promote the country's art in the country and abroad	
Safety Concerns	protect the collection	structural reinforcement	security with brightness and transparency	earthquake and terrorism safe	security without hindering invitingness	terrorism & changing risk perception - made security legal obligation	

Main Narrative and Purpose

IMPS describes itself as the guardian of Türkiye's artistic memory while emphasizing its role in preserving and exhibiting *the country's most important art collection*, dating back to the nation's establishment. Its discourse emphasizes protection, preservation, and the transformation journey from a historical institution to a museum meeting contemporary needs. IMM is framed as Türkiye's first museum dedicated to modern and contemporary art, underlining its responsibility to contribute to societal development by popularizing modern and contemporary art and making it accessible to a broader audience.

Conversely, Arter rejects the museum label (Baliç, Fereli & Evren, 2021). It differentiates itself by positioning itself as a *cultural platform*, focusing on *sustainability*, and *supporting the production and development of contemporary art*. It prioritizes the artist and audience as core actors. One can even come across some of Arter's statements that emphasize the artist's role as the primary creative force. All three institutions aim to contribute to Turkey's cultural development. However, they employ different discourses to reflect their institutional aims. While IMPS aligns with national heritage, IMM seeks to popularize and educate, and Arter supports innovation and artistic freedom.

Design Ideas & Starting Points

IMPS emphasizes the port area's connection to its urban memory and industrial past and, therefore, adopts an adaptive reuse design approach. For this reason, the architect preserves the three-dimensional grid system that reflects the functionality of the building that was used as an entrepot in the past. He makes a clear distinction between exhibition areas and circulation areas, and for this reason, he aims to preserve the grid, which he expresses as the layers of the past, and to display the new layers on it. IMPS serves as a link between the past and the present, fitting for the artwork it houses. It embeds its architectural identity in the city's industrial heritage, focusing on preserving and reinterpreting the historic fabric.

On the other hand, IMM places the Bosphorus, the scenic elements it creates in and around it, and the location of the building at the center of its design. The building's *solid and flying* form, *simple yet industrial elegance*, and reflective qualities mirror a ship sailing on the Bosphorus. It aims to blend seamlessly with its waterfront context. Moreover, the use of columns on the ground floor, as the museum indicated as *the landscape of the columns*, causes the sea interaction to be heightened even further.

Arter adopts a different strategic approach to *design through the voids and sections*, allowing *permeability*, *fluidity*, and *openness* inside and outside the structure. The *eco-friendly*, *human-scale* design prioritizes *dynamism and adaptability* so as not to compete with its artistic content. By avoiding pretentiousness, Arter reflects its identity as an artist and audience-centered cultural platform. While IMPS bases its design on historical preservation, IMM aims to blend in its maritime environment. Arter's modest yet dynamic approach aims to allow a flexible and inclusive space to align with its ethos.

City-Location Narratives

IMPS underlines its location in the center of Istanbul by defining it as a point of connection. This is due to the site's historical and cultural past, especially the Tophane district and its continuing importance (area's identity). Its design aims to remind visitors of this as they move through the museum, framing the surrounding views to enhance the dialogue with the cityscape.

Located beside the Bosphorus, which has an impressive view of Golden Horn and many other locations, IMM encourages interaction between the urbanscape, sea, and land. Its architectural narrative is built on integrating the waterfront promenade and Tophane Square, creating a visual connection between the city and the water, which was problematic before the museum. These narratives also go hand in hand with the museum's design themes of openness and reflectivity, encapsulating the image of a vessel interacting with the dynamic flow of urban life and the sea.

Arter, in Dolapdere, takes a more community-focused and contextual approach, defining itself as *a building that is of its own setting*. The building dialogues with the identity of Dolapdere, emphasizing its *strong bond to the city* and avoiding a detached or imposing presence. Its architectural design aimed

to reflect permeability and human scale themes, blending unpretentiously with its urban setting.

All three museums demonstrate different ways of interacting with their location. IMPS places itself in urban memory and the centrality of its historical site, while IMM embraces engagement with the maritime and urban elements of Istanbul. Finally, Arter integrates itself into the Dolapdere neighborhood, encouraging a sense of inclusiveness and dialogue. These approaches establish different relationships by aligning with the city's architectural and institutional narratives. At the same time, they all endeavor to complement the cultural landscape of Istanbul.

Visitor Narratives

In line with its role as a state museum based on cultural preservation and public service, IMPS positions itself as a *meeting point* by focusing on *social permeability* in its speeches. IMM adopts a more visitor-centered narrative. By creating an open and accessible environment, they aim to create a place where people meet and interact. This works with their mission to popularize art and engage diverse audiences, reflected in its emphasis on transparency and connection with urban spaces. However, Arter diverts itself by extending the idea of accessibility to encompass economic inclusion. They aim to do it with free exhibition areas and affordable pricing policies. So, it strives to become an artistic and social meeting point that invites and embraces diverse audiences, creating its role as a cultural platform prioritizing inclusivity.

The visitor narratives of all three museums emphasize promoting accessibility and social inclusion, but each approaches these goals through different frameworks. IMPS prioritizes cultural continuity, IMM emphasizes urban integration and openness, and Arter gravitates to inclusivity and dialogue, reflecting the institutional and architectural identities of each.

Transparency

The visitor narratives of IMPS, IMM, and Arter converge in their shared emphasis on transparency to foster connection with their surroundings and invite public engagement. All three museums utilize transparent ground floors or facades to create visual and spatial permeability, establishing a bond between the interior and the urban context. However, museums divert from this point by utilizing transparency differently. At this point, IMPS differs by focusing on transparency to emphasize its connection with the historical and cultural texture of the region, while IMM combines transparency with a sense of lightness and height. This combination is intended to symbolize openness and a dynamic relationship with Bosphorus. On the other hand, Arter extends this concept to an extroverted design that aligns with its mission of accessibility and inclusivity, reinforcing its role as a cultural platform integrated with its neighborhood.

Internationality

Although IMPS doesn't have a specific comment regarding being in the international arena and partnering internationally with other museums, it has been stated on several occasions that the museum aims to appeal to all national and international visitors. This is mainly due to the museum's role as the custodian of Türkiye's artistic memory and cultural heritage. In contrast, IMM emphasizes its global outlook through international partnerships. The choice of Renzo Piano, famous for his world-renowned museums, as the architect aimed to position the museum as a *world-class* cultural destination. Similarly, Arter highlights its international partnerships but ties this to a mission of promoting Turkish art both domestically and abroad, blending global engagement with national representation. While IMM focuses on global prestige, Arter balances international aspirations with a commitment to showcasing Turkish art on the world stage, contrasting with IMPS's primarily local and national orientation.

Safety Concerns

Due to Istanbul's location in the earthquake zone, all museums indicate their prevention of damage to earthquake threats. At the same time, each museum expresses its security priorities for its designs. While IMPS frequently mentions the structural reinforcements they make to guarantee earthquake resistance, they also focus on protecting their collection through private security warehouses. IMM combines security with its design philosophy, bringing together clarity and transparency while considering terrorism and earthquake concerns. In addition to being the museum that focuses most on security

measures due to terrorism, it is also the museum that emphasizes earthquake precautions the most in its statements and publications (This may be related to the coincidence of the attacks and earthquakes in Turkey with the museum's design and opening times). Arter also responds to changing perceptions of risk, including terrorism, by balancing security, which has become a legal obligation due to attacks in the period, with its inviting architecture. While all three museums prioritize safety, IMPS centers on safeguarding its collection, IMM blends safety with aesthetic and spatial transparency, and Arter focuses on unobtrusive security measures that align with its inclusive identity.

CONCLUSION

This study examines three Istanbul-based museums' discourses and how they reflect them in their spatial decisions. Museums shape their identities, missions, and visions in interaction with their environment and make architectural decisions accordingly. Starting from this point, this study seeks to reveal how museums exercise their institutional identities and public engagement strategies through architecture and how they construct the differences between each other.

While transparency, accessibility, and public participation are common features of all three museums, their funding models and institutional goals significantly differ in their narratives and architectural approaches (table 2). *IMPS*, a museum affiliated with a state university, emphasizes adaptive reuse and urban memory, moving from its role of preserving Turkey's art memory. With its identity as Turkey's first contemporary art museum, *IMM* positions itself as a global museum, opting for an architecture integrated with the Bosphorus and designed by a world-renowned architect. On the other hand, *Arter* prioritizes permeability, inclusivity, and engagement with its local neighborhood to promote Turkish contemporary art and reach diverse audiences.

Table 2. Table of the Key Institutional and Architectural Distinctions

Criterion	IMPS	IMM	Arter
Institutional Identity	Guardian of National Art Heritage	Turkey's first modern art museum	A cultural platform for contemporary art
Architectural Strategy	Adaptive reuse, urban memory	Transparent, site-specific, Bosphorus integration	Permeability, integration with local context
Visitor Engagement	Historical continuity, educational focus	Urban integration, open public spaces	Inclusive, experimental approaches
Transparency	Selective permeability	Full transparency	Blurred boundaries between interior and exterior

In addition to the fundamental differences summarized in Table 2, these museums also differ in urban location narratives, visitor engagement strategies, and safety considerations. *IMPS* emphasizes historical continuity, *IMM* integrates with the waterfront, and *Arter* engages actively with its immediate neighborhood. Similarly, their understanding of potential visitors influences spatial decisions—*IMM* prioritizes open public spaces, while *Arter* creates a fluid interior-exterior relationship. Safety concerns also influence their architectural choices, as museums seek a balance between openness and structural security. Despite these variations, all three museums consciously use architecture to reinforce institutional visions and engage with their surroundings.

This study focuses on museums with established institutional narratives and newly constructed architectural designs, aiming to ensure access to reliable data in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. It primarily examines architectural discourse and institutional identity as a limitation of the study. It excludes curatorial strategies, collection narratives, and visitor surveys. The goal is not to make a universal statement about art museums but to provide insights into how architecture functions as a discursive and strategic tool in shaping museum identity.

The findings of this study generate new and necessary questions regarding the long-term effects of these museums' architectural choices. How will these designs affect the perception and functionality of these

institutions within the changing urban and cultural fabric of Istanbul – and, indeed, the global art world? To what extent will visitors accept and engage with the spatial narratives these institutions have constructed for themselves? These questions emerge as a result of this research and underscore the need for further studies on the role and impact of architecture in shaping museum identity and institutional narratives.

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