

REOPENING OF THE MUSEUM OF ETHNOGRAPHY, GENEVA

Colin Martin explored the newly developed Museum of Ethnography in Geneva, a five-storeyed, 5,432m² extension with a cantilevered porch entrance that opens onto a garden square. Internally, two 'black boxes' house MEG's collection of 80,000 ethnographic objects, including a permanent display entitled *The Archives of Human Diversity*, which features a case of Māori objects.



Founded in 1901, the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva (MEG) outgrew its former building, facing a garden, which it had occupied since 1941. Sited at right angles, its new 5,432m² extension completes a garden square opening to the street, bounded on its opposite side by an elementary school. In 2008, the Swiss practice Graber Pulver won an open competition, which attracted 50 entries. Its solution, respecting the scale of adjacent buildings, provides an additional 2,020m² of exhibition space. Providing five storeys, including two basement storeys extending beneath the garden, the building has a modest footprint at ground level. "Being Switzerland, a referendum was mandatory in 2010 when a few citizens objected to the removal of eight mature

trees," said Marco Graber. Electoral common sense prevailed and the project was completed within four years, on time and on budget at 51.6 million Swiss francs, with "not a single extra franc" available for its realisation.

The building's reflective, aluminium-clad roofline is a bold addition on an otherwise architecturally unremarkable urban site, soaring dramatically downwards before levelling off to form a cantilevered porch over the museum entry, welcoming and sheltering visitors. This aesthetic nod towards lightweight Oceanic pavilions contrasts with the interlaced patterning on the swooping roof, suggestive of both Islamic architecture and traditional wickerwork.

ABOVE

A gleaming aluminium-clad frontage, punctured with rhombus-shaped glazed openings, spills down into a cantilevered porch over the museum's entrance. Photograph: Nicole Zermatten – Ville de Genève.



"The client stipulated two 'black boxes' to house permanent and temporary exhibition spaces," says Graber. The MEG collection consists of 80,000 ethnographic objects of which 1,200 are now exhibited in the new permanent space, in a display entitled *The Archives of Human Diversity*. "Usually, we would expect to display only 300 objects freely in an area of 1,000 square metres," says Philippe Mathez, MEG project director. The Stuttgart-based practice Atelier Brückner designed an informal grid comprising 77 glazed vitrines, which display objects collected from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and

Oceania. Objects vary greatly in size; in the case of Māori objects, items range from a tiki nephrite pendant to a poupou wooden panel from a whareniui. Visitors experience privileged 'behind the scenes' museum access, with the possibility of noting cultural connections and cross-references, instead of being constrained within an enfilade of galleries. Rather than visitors being thrown in at the deep end with 1,200 objects, an introductory display of 100 key objects from the five continents provides a visual 'taster' of what can be expected. This display is screened from the 'storage' area by *Sea*, an ingenious video installation by artist Ange Leccia. Waves breaking on the shore were filmed from above but flipped through 90 degrees when projected, appearing as vertical jets of water. The temporary exhibition area offers great flexibility for displaying single-focus exhibitions with limitless possibilities for reconfiguring its space.

The first storey provides an atelier for workshops and the second storey houses the library, an ethereal tented space, evoking a Christian cathedral. Its thick walls, punctured with rhombus-shaped glazed openings, permit this structure to be load bearing, so that lower levels can remain free of structural pillars, providing unimpeded spaces, which mirror the openness of this museum's collection. www.meg-geneve.ch

ABOVE

The permanent exhibition, showing video installation *Sea*, "an ingenious video installation by artist Ange Leccia". Stuttgart-based practice Atelier Brückner GmbH designed the scenography, an informal grid comprising 77 glazed vitrines for displaying objects.

LEFT

Part of the Oceania display in the permanent exhibition.

Photographs: MEG – Atelier Brückner, Daniel Stauch.