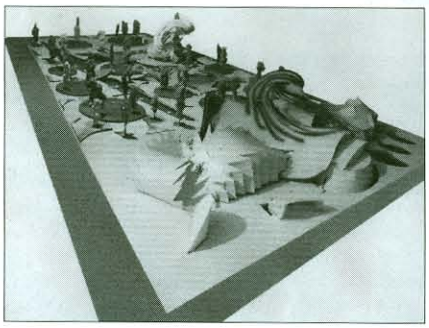
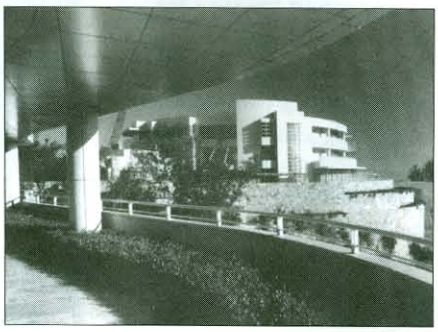
The Age of the Museum



Costantini Museum competition scheme, Frank Stella and Robert Kahn



The Getty Center, Los Angeles, Richard Meier

by Jayne Merkel

More ink has been spilled on museums in recent months than on all other building types combined. And though the real story is that new museums of all types are being created every day (600 new art museums since 1970 in the United States alone) and existing ones keep expanding, even as funding for the arts dwindles, attention has focused mostly on the openings of the Getty Center, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and the selection of an architect for the Museum of Modern Art addition. One reason is that art museums — which are unusually sophisticated clients, willing to take risks and pay for aesthetic ventures — produce more masterpieces than any other kind of institution. Another is that, since they are open to the public and apt to be influential, we feel we have a stake in their design.

Museum commissions correlate uncannily with architects' reputations. Consider **Frank Lloyd Wright** after the Guggenheim, **Louis I. Kahn** after the Kimball, **I. M. Pei** after the Louvre, **James Ingo Freed** after the Holocaust Museum, and **Frank Gehry** after Bilbao. The correlation applies up and down the spectrum of receptions museums receive. The architect is even linked with the character of the museum, as **Daniel Libeskind** is with the Jewish Museum in Berlin, **Peter Eisenman** is with the Wexner Center, **Richard Gluckman** is with Dia, **Gwathmey Siegel** is with the Guggenheim extension, and **Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo** is with the Met. It is hard to think of an architect of major status in the second half of the twentieth century who has not built a museum.

Even being seriously considered for a major museum commission is a career booster. Several of the semifinalists for the Museum of Modern Art expansion, which was awarded to **Yashio Taniguchi** last month, have already received other museum jobs. **Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates** won the American Museum of Folk Art commission on the same West 53rd Street block before MoMA finalists were even chosen. **Steven Holl Architects**, completing the Museum of Modern Art in Helsinki and the addition to the Cranbrook Museum of Science, was commissioned to design the Bellevue Art Museum in the fall (*Oculus*, November 1995, p. 5; November 1997, p. 3; January 1998, p. 5). Three days after the winner was announced, finalist **Bernard Tschumi** became a finalist again when the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati chose him, **Daniel Libeskind** and **Zaha Hadid** from a star-laden semifinal field of twelve (*Oculus*, December 1997, p. 3).

But it's never over till it's over, and sometimes not even then. Who would have thought, when **Cesar Pelli** got the commission for the last Museum of Modern Art expansion 20 years ago, that the museum would be ready to grow again by the end of the century, that **Philip Johnson** would be back as a force to be reckoned with, and his earlier additions, which were hacked away at the edges in the late 1970s, would be considered sacrosanct, while Pelli's atrium became a target for demolition. Certainly nobody could have guessed that Taniguchi would be the architect. Hardly anyone in America had ever heard of him when he was named a semifinalist, though he had a number of impressive museums to his credit and some had been published in the United States.

Who would have thought, when **Frank Gehry** (the obvious hometown candidate for the most coveted commission of the 1980s) lost out to **Richard Meier**, that when the Getty Center finally opened in 1997, all eyes would be dazzled by a Gehry museum in an obscure little Spanish city, and Meier would be publishing a tale as much of tribulation as of triumph. (*Building the Getty*, by Richard Meier, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, 211 pages, 8 1/4 x 8 1/4, 145 photographs, $35.00 cloth). The biggest problems — inaccessibility, inflexibility, an ill-defined institutional agenda — were no fault of the architect. They were programmed in. The limitless budget does not seem to have been a factor, except in creating unrealistic expectations and making it possible to proceed too soon. As Martin Filler made very clear in *The New York Review of Books* ("The New Getty," December 18, 1997, pp. 29–34), the Getty was simply too young and unformed to know what it wanted or needed.

Although regard for Wright's Guggenheim as a building has never wavered, its reputation as a museum has ebbed and flowed with the art that has been shown there or was in style at the time. The better a museum fulfills its original purpose (and the Guggenheim served the original small-scale, modern Guggenheim collection well), the worse it is apt to be at adapting to change. Museums need clairvoyance when they plan galleries specifically to meet their needs. Long-term judgments about the Guggenheim in Bilbao are likely to be based both on what the museum ends up becoming and on the influence it exerts

David Karp

Museum of Jewish Heritage, Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates

Paul Warchol

Visitor center, Claire Weisz and Mark Yoes

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Visitor center, Claire Weisz and Mark Yoes

on other museums. There are sure to be some horrors as less disciplined and experienced hands try to emulate Gehry's bold moves.

The Museum that Should Have Been

Unfortunately, the most interesting candidate for comparison is not going to be built. A collaboration between the artist **Frank Stella** and the New York architect **Robert Kahn**, the Costantini Museum was designed for an international competition to house a private collection of modern Latin American paintings, but won only honorable mention. The brief called for an "urban landmark" on a park-like, 75,000-square-foot public plaza in Buenos Aires. Although the proposed 45,200-square-foot, partially underground structure with an auditorium, temporary exhibition space, bookstore, café, office, and workshop is composed of curved forms like Bilbao, it crawls along the ground more like a creature with a jagged tail, and spirals upward and downward at the same time. It is intended to have an organic quality that makes it part of the landscape of the redesigned plaza and recalls the "primal landscape" of the womb.

Visitors cross a footbridge to enter a convoluted space with access to circular permanent and oval temporary galleries, which lead down to more regular, skylighted exhibition spaces on lower levels -- — sort of a reverse Guggenheim Fifth Avenue. The project is interesting both for the merger of man-made and natural landscape forms that coexist on the colorful plaza (a second structure rises above the trees on the other end) and for the integration of art and architecture. Although the interior spaces are rationally conceived, the exterior shapes resemble creatures of the sea, jungle flora, and elements from Stella's paintings and sculptures, which have become increasingly volumetric over the years. Like Gehry, Stella, who is one of the most highly regarded artists of our time, has been investigating three-dimensional space for decades, but he started from a pictorial point of view, working first with flat rectangles, then with shaped canvas, and then with shaped canvas in relief. He moved to room-size, tent-like constructions and recently into three dimensions with insides, outsides, and architectural scale in a design for the visitor center at Philip Johnson's estate. He has worked with Kahn on a number of projects for his own properties. Their collaboration on the Costantini Museum puts a new spin on the much discussed competition between art and architecture, though obviously not all paintings would be equally happy there. Still, it would have provided an intriguing contrast to sculpturesque museums designed solely by architects.

Subtly Sculpturesque

No one will call the tiny visitor center for the new Museum of Jewish Heritage in Battery Park City assertive, but it is certainly sculpturesque, without a curve in sight. A pair of shining trapezoids — one made of clear glass, the other covered in lead-coated copper roofing — intersect to create a quietly striking 1,300-square-foot pavilion containing a ticket window, administrative offices, and a security checkpoint, which were left out of the program for the pyramidal museum by **Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo & Associates**. That solid, sober, symbolic, symmetrical structure with inside and outside separated by heavy stone walls, set the tone for the tiny addition, which complements it by contrast. The museum's static, monumental exterior gives no hint of the fluid journey inside, where flashing slides in a dignified, Rothko Chapel–like hexagonal space orient visitors, who then travel through exhibitions on early twentieth-century Jewish life, up to a darker space on the second floor for an intimate trip through the Holocaust years, and up again to a light-filled space where the years of renewal from 1945 to the present are celebrated.

Inside and outside are one in the the visitor center by architect **Claire Weisz** and **Mark Yoes**, who are married but don't usually practice together. Their light, open, irregular structure looks out on the main museum, park, and city skyline, orienting visitors by letting them see where they are and where they are going. It creates an upbeat transition between the struggles of the past and the possibilities of the future visible all around at the foot of the New York skyline.

Taniguchi's MoMA

It may seem conservative because its simple geometric volumes, subtle lighting, and respectful insertions will make it look as if it has always been there. But its archeological approach — uncovering original building fabric, restoring it in some places (the entrance canopy and interior Bauhaus staircase), and revealing it in others (the base of the MoMA tower on the garden facade) — is radical in a modern museum, dedicated by definition to newness and change. And the problem-

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Plaza Hotel and Heckscher Building (the Museum of Modern Art opens on the twelfth floor of the Heckscher Building, 1929)

Peter Harholdt

Museum of Modern Art, 1939 facade, Philip Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone

David Allison

Aerial view from the northeast of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden, model, Yoshio Taniguchi

solving approach Taniguchi took, though modern theoretically, departs from the more intuitive aesthetic used on most ambitious art museum buildings.

It is probably what got him the job, since all three finalists presented clear, reasoned, legible schemes. But when they submitted final projects, the other two contenders added expressionistic elements and presented the trustees with more information and ideas. Taniguchi did what worked the first time. He also interviewed the members of the staff in depth and listened to their suggestions.

The architect's patient analysis of the problems at hand ends up looking simple — or obvious. But it was not so obvious when the problems were first presented.

He proposed restoring the facades along 53rd Street but moving the main entrance to 54th Street, which has always seemed like the back door — at least since the garden wall went up. He softens that edge with a row of trees and connects 53rd and 54th streets midblock with a public passageway on the west side of the garden, where the ticket booths will be located. The garden itself, the museum's best feature, will be restored and extended. A library accessible to the public will be placed at the east end where the restaurants are now. The atrium will be relieved of its circulatory function; the escalators will be moved away from the garden. The big new galleries that big new art demands will be located on the Dorset Hotel site. But though the museum will almost double in size, the scale will change almost imperceptibly, and only in some locations.

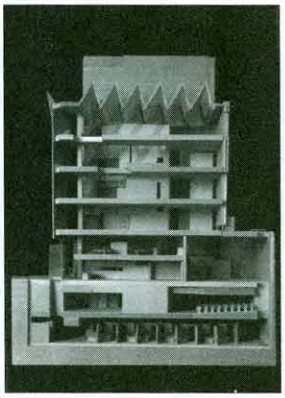
Taniguchi's decision to reveal the museum's architectural history is part of a trend James Fenton recently identified ("What Are Museums For?," *The New York Review of Books*, January 15, 1998, pp. 40–45). The Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and other museums are ripping out "functional" modern insertions to reveal original buildings and thereby make their own architectural history part of their educational programs. The movement gives architecture a more assertive and complicated role, substituting authenticity for practicality, and placing the museums themselves in a larger cultural and urban context.

Next door to MoMA on 53rd Street, **Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates** has dealt with history more allusively in the design for the Museum of American Folk Art's first freestanding building. The $19 million, 20-foot-wide structure will contain 12,500 square feet of galleries, a 100-seat lecture hall, an amphitheater, a cafeteria, and a giftshop on six stories above ground and two underground levels. A folded wall of steel paneling extending the full height of the facade will contain the image of a hand, adding meaning subtly and abstractly, as it is conveyed in folk art. Visitors will experience the collection from the top down, descending through galleries filled with natural light from a saw-toothed skylight. The light will invest the objects with the spiritual power their makers intended. The craftsmanly treatment of materials, typical of the architects' work, will also connect it with its collections and with the arts and crafts tradition behind the history of modern architecture.

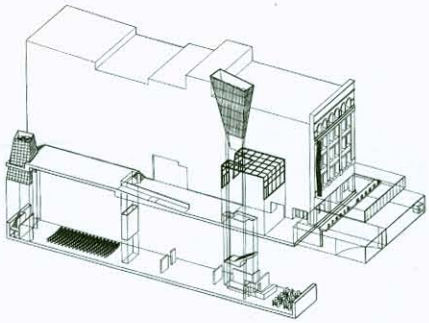
Museums in the Boroughs

Eighty blocks north, the Studio Museum in Harlem occupies a six-story, mixed-use building on 125th Street. The museum acquired a derelict building next door five years ago, tore it down, and created a paved courtyard on the site to give itself some breathing room. Now **Rogers Marvel Architects** is turning the 25-by-200-foot open lot into a functioning public space with a sculpture garden, auditorium, galleries for the permanent collection, and a sleek, new, modern glass-walled entrance that connects the new underground facilities and the garden on their roof to the existing museum, visually and functionally. The architects are working with the city's Department of Design and Construction and Department of Cultural Affairs on the $4.5 million, 12,000-square-foot project, which includes renovation of the existing building. The new steel-and-glass entrance resembles the original MoMA facade, but here the outer wall is enticingly translucent, rather than transparent, and it houses a glass pavilion that carries natural light and conditioned air to the gallery and lobby below ground. Crisp modern letters spell "STUDIO MUSEUM" on top of a horizontal slab of an awning, which demarcates the original first floor. A truncated pyramid, finished in stained concrete, rises out of the underground galleries carrying stairs and building services from the auditorium to the sculpture garden. It is expected to begin construction in June, be completed by the end of 1999, and play a role in the Harlem Renaissance nearby.

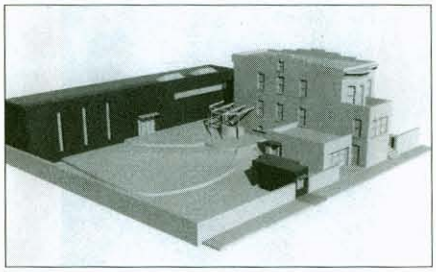
In Queens, where **Frederick Fisher** recently redesigned and expanded P.S. 1



Museum of American Folk Art, Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates



The Studio Museum in Harlem, Rogers Marvel Architects



The Louis Armstrong House Museum, Rogers Marvel Architects

(*Oculus*, November 1997, p. 5) with **David W. Prendergast,** and **Rafael Viñoly** renovated the Queens Museum a few years ago, **Rogers Marvel** and the Department of Design and Construction are also at work on the Louis Armstrong House Museum. The approximately $762,000, 4,500-square-foot project is expected to begin construction in the spring. It should attract 60,000 visitors a year to the musician's modest, three-story row house on 107th Street in Corona. The architects and city officials are in the process of deciding whether to build an addition on adjacent land for the Louis Armstrong archives and other facilities for visitors to the museum.

Museums by New York Architects Elsewhere

At the College of Wooster in Ohio, **Kliment & Halsband Architects** has created a new museum and art center in a Gothic Revival gymnasium, which became a studio art building 25 years ago. In order to retain an intact second-floor gymnasium and third-floor running track in the 32,000-square-foot historic structure, and use it for studio space, the architects elected to build a 17,000-square-foot addition for the museum galleries and art history classrooms. The new curved wing faces playing fields surrounded by dormitories. It derives its imagery and window patterns from the original building while frankly acknowledging its newness and activating the open space nearby. The centrally located museum lobby embraces the original terra-cotta entrance, reiterating the connection, but also leads confidently into new light-filled space inside.

The history that **I. M. Pei** has drawn on in the design of the new Miho Museum in the precipitous Shigaraki mountains north of Kyoto is that of ancient Chinese and Japanese landscape painting, where a narrative is merely suggested in fragments. He has buried 80 percent of the 187,508-square-foot museum in the mountains, designed the roof to reflect the forms of the landscape, and covered it with trees. Visitors approach the 27-acre site, nestled between two ridges, through a mountain tunnel. They cross a deep valley on a 400-foot bridge supported by cables, and encounter the museum plaza, where they ascend a series of terraces reminiscent of a Japanese temple. Then they enter the main public space of the museum, sheathed in honey-colored limestone, where the Shumei family collection of art and antiquities is displayed against the horizon under hipped skylights. (Who said the Getty was out of the way?)

Destination Museums

Another trend, about as far from these Xanadus as you can get, is the creation of mini-museums at existing tourist destinations. The Skyscraper Museum, which sprang up last summer in the middle of the Wall Street canyons, may be the best example. The concept, developed by **Lynne Breslin**, was to create an image of the Street with rooms off to the side where tableaux composed of old office furniture and cases filled with intriguing old documents were displayed. A pair of gigantic photographic murals contrasted the 1909 banking hall at 44 Wall Street with its 1996 image. The museum left those temporary headquarters at the end of the year and is now negotiating a long-term venue.

Breslin is one of a handful of architects who specializes in on-site installations (page 12). For the new Grand Central Terminal, which is becoming a shopping mall as well as a transportation hub, she is designing exhibitions about the history of the station, the way it has been represented in the movies, the unionization of Grand Central workers, and the train cars themselves, bringing full circle the trend of museums to record their own history, embrace commerce, and provide tourists with entertainment and an educational experience at the same time.