THE SKY LINE

Outside the Box

Yoshio Taniguchi's elegant expansion of the Modern.

by Paul Goldberger

The first building that the Museum of Modern Art put up for itself, in 1939, wasn't sumptuous, like the Met, or extravagantly sculptural, like the Guggenheim, two decades later. It was a crisp, blunt box. Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone's International Style architecture was defiantly austere—a retort to the idea that museums should resemble grandiose palaces. The white marble building burst out of a row of genteel brownstones on West Fifty-third Street, forcing its way into the Manhattan cityscape. It was a matter of pride that the new building looked nothing like its neighbors.

The museum's idiosyncratic appearance was always a bit of a pose, however. Though the building's original design emphasized its difference from the old architecture around it, the ultimate goal of the Modern's curators was to make all the old stuff go away. In 1951, a new wing by Philip Johnson was built along the museum's western edge, and in 1964 another, larger Johnson addition appeared on its eastern flank. The Modern grew again in 1984, with a new section by Cesar Pelli, who also designed a companion fifty-two-story apartment tower. And with the opening, this month, of the largest expansion yet, a four-hundred-and-twenty-five-million-dollar addition and renovation by the Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi, the Modern has pretty much taken over the block. The museum stretches along Fifty-third Street from just west of Fifth Avenue to just short of Sixth, and it reaches north to cover most of Fifty-fourth Street, too. You couldn't ask for a clearer symbol of how modernism has moved from the cultural fringe to the mainstream. Not only has it been years since the art at the Modern has challenged anyone—its Matisses and Pollocks are beloved by all—but Taniguchi's strict geometries of stone and glass feel as conventional as a Doric colonnade.

When the Goodwin and Stone building opened, Lewis Mumford wrote that "it possesses, to a degree not dreamed of even by the designers of Rockefeller Center, the luxury of space." But it wasn't particularly big; it was barely larger than the neighboring brownstones. Arthur Drexler, who headed the architecture-and-design department for decades, liked to observe that until the 1984 expansion you could fit the entire Museum of Modern Art into the Great Hall of the Met. The Modern didn't have any enormous galleries, and most of its exhibition spaces were domestic in scale. In fact, the affection that many people felt for the museum was formed by the experience of seeing paintings in fairly small, low-ceilinged white rooms.

The 1984 expansion was an attempt to make the museum bigger without changing its basic qualities, and it didn't work very well. The galleries got somewhat larger and there were many more of them, this time connected by a prominent set of escalators—yet the place felt unnaturally attenuated, like a stretch limousine. The general feeling about the expansion was summed up by Kirk Varnedoe, the chief curator of painting and sculpture, who said, "We squeezed the last juice you could get out of that model and maybe killed it in the process." In 1996, when Varnedoe made that remark, it was clear that if the Modern was to grow again it would have to break from small, white rooms and neutral, International Style architecture. Ronald Lauder, the museum's chairman, reinforced this idea, saying that, as far as the trustees were concerned, the architecture should be "as exciting as possible."

That isn't what happened. The Modern talked to dozens of architects, including Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, and Steven Holl, as well as Taniguchi, and it commissioned casual studies from ten architects and then more detailed plans from three. In 1997, the museum snubbed the radicals and hired

Taniguchi, who represents not the cutting edge of architecture but, rather, a carefully wrought, highly refined modernism—a cool and reserved aesthetic that has more in common with the Modern's original credo than with the expressive direction of recent architecture and museum design.

The decision, I suspect, was based in part on disappointment with the avant-garde architects' proposals but mostly on the realization that the Modern is fundamentally a conservative institution. The choice of Taniguchi wasn't so much a failure of nerve as a moment of institutional self-knowledge. This museum wouldn't have wanted Bilbao if Frank Gehry had done it for nothing. The Modern has supported, collected, and celebrated architectural design more than any other museum in America, but it has never allowed its identity to be defined by any architecture of its own. It is one thing to display Frank Lloyd Wright models inside your galleries; it is quite another to have Rem Koolhaas design your building. The Modern chose Taniguchi, a sixty-seven-year-old architect who was educated at Harvard but has done almost all of his professional work in Japan, because it thought that he could best preserve the museum's DNA.

That doesn't explain why Taniguchi's new Modern is as good as it is. Taniguchi clearly understood a paradox that underscores this project—that his success at keeping the museum the same would come, in part, from his ability to recognize how much had to change. His Modern was going to be nearly twice the size of the previous one, and he knew better than to simply distend the old spaces. With its sleek glass walls and sharp, rectilinear lines, Taniguchi's huge building superficially resembles the Modern of old, but in many ways it represents a greater change than the oddly shaped buildings proposed by some architects the museum considered, like Herzog and de Meuron, who suggested adding a prismatic glass tower, but would have left the museum's most celebrated paintings in the old Goodwin and Stone galleries.

Although Taniguchi has created some superb display spaces, his design is most splendid, and subtle, in its urbanism. Until now, the Modern has had an unresolved, almost hesitant relationship with midtown Manhattan. When the benign tension between the 1939 building and the old houses disappeared, nothing replaced it. The museum didn't feel connected to the city, except in the sculpture garden. When the Modern bought and demolished the Dorset Hotel, on Fifty-fourth Street, along with numerous small brownstones, its site grew not only bigger but also more complex, and Taniguchi saw this as a chance to weave the building into the fabric of the city. He gave it a new entrance, on Fifty-fourth Street, and he provided a public passageway through the block to Fifty-third Street, a huge lobby that anyone can use as a shortcut through a busy section of midtown. The museum now faces both streets, and it has finally become part of the connective tissue of Manhattan. The old Modern occupied the street in sullen isolation; this one dances with its neighbors. Taniguchi even sliced away a bit of his building in the southeast corner of the garden, where it might have blocked a portion of St. Thomas Church, which adjoins the museum to the east. On the inside, he has set skylights on the top floor, right against the base of Pelli's tower, creating dazzling views right up its side toward the sky.

Taniguchi's façade of absolute black granite, aluminum panels, and white and gray glass is elegantly restrained. It proves that you can ensconce a building within a kind of classic modern tradition and still imbue it with freshness. And the design works on a large scale—so well that Pelli's apartment tower, which always seemed too big, now feels like a natural part of a composition. It is balanced by a new, smaller tower at the west end of the site, which houses the museum's offices, and by two monumental, portico-like gateways at the east and west ends of the sculpture garden. Those porticoes, which resemble gigantic bookends, frame the garden from inside the building, and from the outside they ennoble the transition between the garden and the museum. The sculpture garden has been restored to its original Philip Johnson design (Pelli encroached on it

with a greenhouselike structure containing escalators), but the new surroundings that Taniguchi has made for it give the garden a greater intensity.

The interior is a little less reserved than the outside, but not much. The new lobby offers glimpses up to a six-story skylit atrium that cuts through the new gallery floors, Taniguchi's acknowledgment that a building this big needs vertical as well as horizontal space. The atrium contains precisely positioned openings, projections, balconies, and overlooks; it is a pristine exercise in proportion, scale, and light, not the kind of razzle-dazzle hotel architecture that the word "atrium" calls to mind.

Once inside the museum, visitors follow a sequence that is quite different from that of the old Modern: contemporary art is shown mainly in a set of large, double-height galleries on the second floor, and you move backward in time as you rise through the building and the ceilings get lower. The famous paintings that once hung on the second floor are now on the fifth, in rooms that are only slightly larger than the old ones. At the top of the gallery wing, on the sixth floor, are grand, loftlike galleries for temporary exhibitions.

The main difference is that there is no longer a single sequence of movement, as there famously was at the Modern: one route through obsessively linear galleries that presented the history of art as a straight shot from Cézanne to Picasso to Matisse. The Modern's singular view of art history came, over time, to take on the stature of myth, and these days politically correct critics call it into question, but the fact is that the gallery scheme was as much a result of physical limitations as of curators' sensibilities. In the narrow confines of the old Modern, there wasn't really room to arrange things any other way. Now, though, the building is vast, and its galleries aren't episodes in a narrative but hyperlinks, offering connections in multiple directions. Terence Riley, the head of the museum's department of architecture and design, refers to the layout as resembling the child's game Chutes and Ladders—you can move straight through, or you can slip down a stairway or up an escalator and find yourself in an entirely different moment in the history of art. This approach is more liberating than confusing, because the basic order of the building is always apparent; this museum is not a structure that, like the Met, rambles so much that you get lost in it.

Some of the most pleasant aspects of the design are in the details: a magnificent cantilevered staircase of wood and metal between the fourth and fifth floors is an expert homage to Mies van der Rohe. Taniguchi makes a complex array of balconies, bridges, porticoes, stairs, openings, vistas, and passageways seem serene rather than hyperactive. The building won't feel busy enough for people weaned on the non-stop stimulation of a lot of today's architecture, and it won't feel modest enough for people who insist that God meant the Museum of Modern Art to be small. But I suspect that it will please almost everybody else.

The architect has also restored the façade of the original Goodwin and Stone building, whose Thermolux translucent panels were covered up long ago to provide more hanging space. The restoration is exquisite, and it is both uplifting and saddening. The old building looks better than it has in half a century, both inside and out. But it has been spiffed up like a grande dame who has been dressed to be put on display at her grandchild's party. When you look at the old building from Fifty-third Street, it seems almost embalmed—a beautiful relic trapped inside a sprawling temple.