

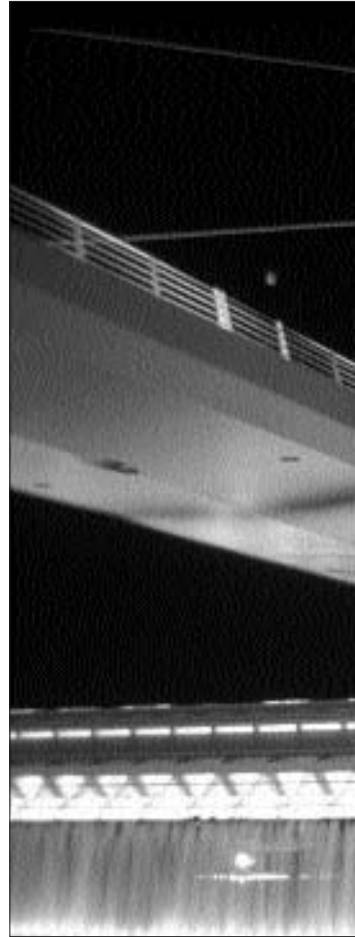
The Museum as Artifact

by Jayne Merkel

HOping to recapture their days of glory, the citizens of Santiago de Compostela, in Spain's northwestern corner, have embarked on a building program even more ambitious than the one that created the magnificent 11th-century Romanesque church that awed the medieval pilgrims who flocked to the city seeking the tomb of St. James. They are now constructing an 810,000-square-foot Galician Cultural Center on a 173-acre mountaintop two miles from the historic heart of the city. The gargantuan \$125-million effort signals a new age of faith, a faith whose core belief is in the power of museum architecture to attract fame, fortune, and tourists, as the spectacular Guggenheim Museum designed by Los Angeles architect Frank Gehry has done for the Basque capital of Bilbao in northeastern Spain.

The form not the content matters. The \$100 million, 256,000-square-foot Bilbao Guggenheim was not built to house an existing art collection. In fact, there was none. At least until the recent recession, the New York Guggenheim's entrepreneurial director, Thomas Krens, had been establishing a chain of museums around the world (Berlin, Las Vegas, New York's SoHo, and Venice, where the museum has long maintained Peggy Guggenheim's villa) to exhibit the New York institution's holdings. But architecture, not the shows, has attracted the hordes to Bilbao. Because architecture put the Guggenheim on the international map, the people of Santiago de Compostela are using architecture to do the same. After an international competition, they chose as their architect Peter Eisenman of New York. He is of approximately Gehry's age and professional stature—but has an even more radical reputation. His first major building was the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University (1983–89), so much a phenomenon unto itself that it opened before any art was installed. The building was sufficient display.

Like the Bilbao Guggenheim, the Galician Cultural Center is being constructed without a collection. Its six buildings will contain a Museum of Galician History (for exhibitions of photographs, electronic materials, and whatever else can be assembled), a library, a 1,500-seat music theater, an IMAX theater, an administration building with reception halls, and a New





The Milwaukee Museum of Art, a prime example of the new breed of showplace institutions, appears ready to take flight from its perch on the Lake Michigan shore.

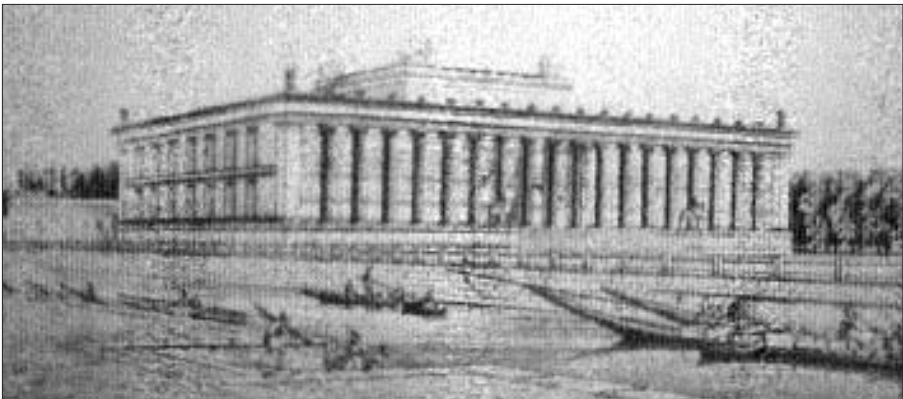
Technologies Center with galleries, video games, an archive, and research areas. But the main attraction will be the massive native-stone buildings that will look as if they were pushed right up through the earth.

Traditionally museums have been built to house collections, and for ancillary functions such as storage, conservation, administration, and education. But after Bilbao opened in 1997, interest in the *architecture* of museums escalated exponentially, and civic leaders all over the world have been hiring famous architects to build museums intended to cause a sensation. Cultural institutions in a number of cities (Chicago, New York, Seattle, Washington, D.C.) have commissioned Gehry himself. Elsewhere, as in Santiago de Compostela, they recruited architects whose work may be even more provocative. A distinguished museum building has become the ultimate contemporary trophy, the most sought-after artifact in the 21st-century city. We have taken to an entirely new level a trend that began, if not in Berlin in 1823, when the great German classicist Karl Friedrich Schinkel designed one of the first buildings for the specific purpose of publicly exhibiting art, then certainly when Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum opened in New York in 1959.

Museums

Most clients of architects are developers who build for profit, and even if they had the will and the expertise to select great architects few of them could justify the commitment in time and money that serious architecture demands. America's public buildings—courthouses, police stations, firehouses, schools—used to be designed by talented architects and constructed of substantial materials, but that changed after World War II, when economy and speed took precedence over design and quality. Occasionally, an initiative such as the U.S. General Services Administration's Excellence in Architecture program supports ambitious design by selecting leading firms such as Richard Meier & Partners or Pei Cobb Freed, but it's the exception. The most valued patrons of ambitious architecture in our time are art museums, just as art collectors today are the principal clients for serious private architecture.

Museums were a product of the Enlightenment. Napoleon opened part of the former royal palace at the Louvre to the public in 1793; there, the French royal collection was exhibited in the Grande Galerie, which had proven ideal for viewing works of art. Within a decade of the opening of the Louvre, professors at the French Academy began drawing plans for museums, and a few years later a collector in the village of Dulwich, near London, commissioned a museum from Sir John Soane. Not



The strong design of Berlin's neo-classical Altes Museum (1830) influenced many that followed.

surprisingly, palace architecture—grand, classical, urban, and horizontal—was a principal influence when the first museums were designed. But like most public buildings at the time, they were built in the classical style for other reasons as well, including classicism's association with government and law (Roman basilicas), with the sacred (Greek temples and Italian Renaissance churches), and with the culture and art of the past.

The most influential early museums were Leo von Klenze's Munich Glyptothek (1816–30) and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin (1823–30), which occupies a site surrounded by the Spree River that came to

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be known as Museum Island because a whole cluster of museums grew up there. The Glyptothek has a square plan, with galleries of various geometric shapes surrounding a central courtyard. Though the building rises only one story, a Greek temple front with tall Ionic columns makes it seem larger. Schinkel's brilliant and well-preserved Altes Museum rises two stories behind an uninterrupted giant order of Ionic columns and a broad staircase. Inside, courtyards flank a central rotunda and a monumental stair to second-floor galleries, where perpendicular panels supplement wall space. The upstairs galleries are flooded with natural light from larger windows than, for reasons of security, had been used in single-story museums.

The great art museums in London—Sir Robert Smirke's British Museum (1823) and William Wilkins's National Gallery (1832–38)—follow this classical model, as do so many museums elsewhere in Europe. Almost all the features that most people today associate with art museums were incorporated into these early examples. In one way or another, they solved the major problems of exhibition design—lighting, security, procession through space—and they did so with enough success that the classical museum building persisted for another 150 years.

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Many of the first museums in the United States were built later, when Victorian architecture was in full bloom, so they drew on medieval rather than classical sources. Neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque buildings for the display of natural or historical objects (such as James Renwick's 1849 Smithsonian castle in Washington, D.C., and Calvert Vaux and J. Wrey Mould's American Museum of Natural History in New York, 1872–77) have tended to retain their original fronts, though many later acquired classical wings. But the classical style soon returned to favor, and the major art museums covered up their Victorian Gothic arches (as in Vaux and Mould's 1874–80 façade for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) and presented themselves to the public in the "proper" classical mode. Every major (and many a minor) American art museum of the first half of the 20th century has a grand classical façade.

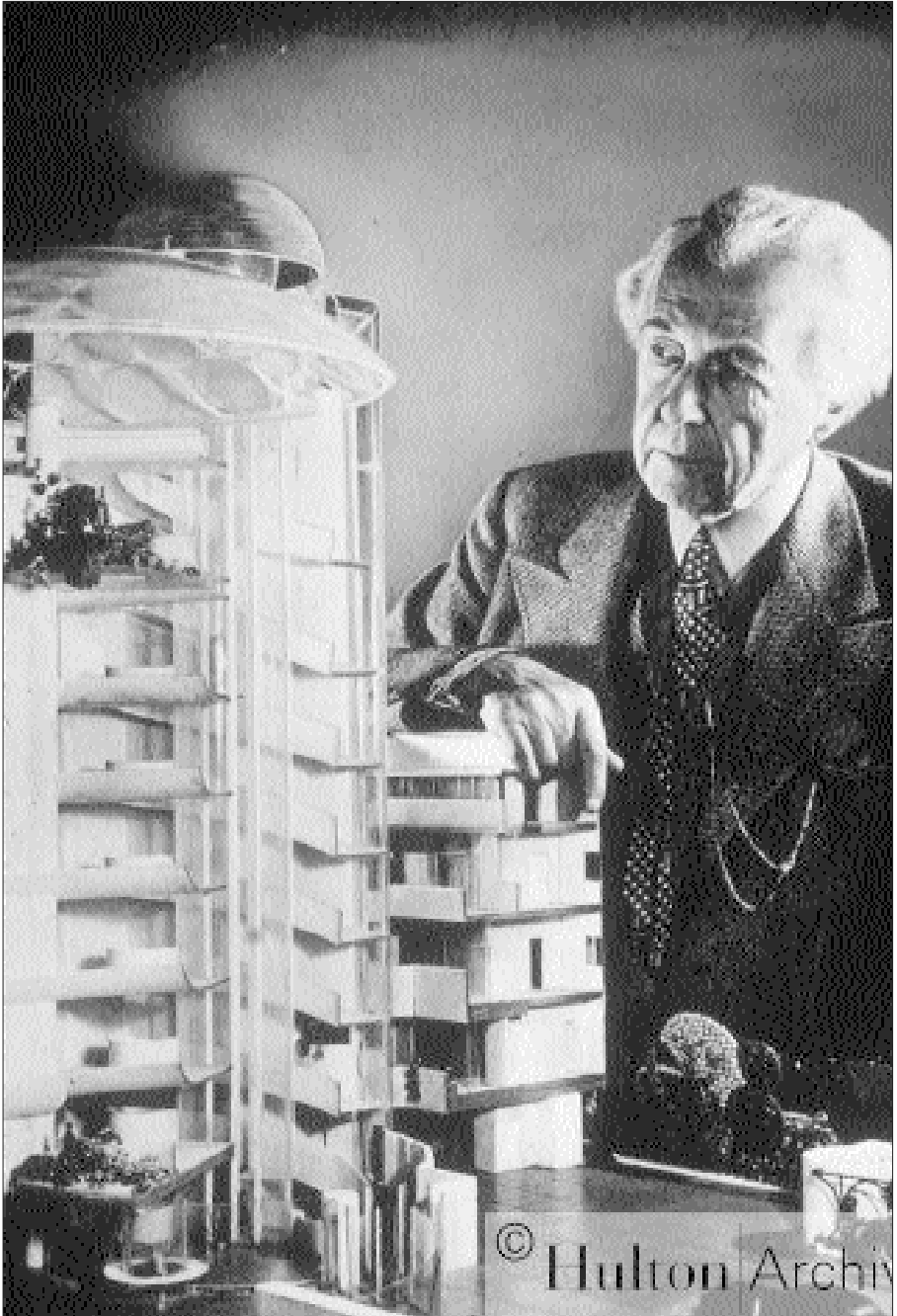
If West Coast museums fail to conform to the classical type, it is because they appeared after the watershed year of 1939. Two years earlier, John Russell Pope of New York, the last of the great classical masters, had won a competition to build the new National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Pope's museum, with a temple front approached by grand stairs and flanked by matching wings, holds its place proudly on the National Mall. A dome rises behind the front, and, inside, dignified grand galleries and inte-

rior courtyards provide a sense of history. The building looks bigger and older than it is—which is how it was intended to look.

In 1939, a new era arrived when the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York set out to build its first permanent home. (The museum had opened in a Fifth Avenue office building just 10 years earlier.) To MoMA's founders, modernism wasn't just a style; it was a cause that transcended national boundaries and connected all the arts. Enthusiasts saw modernism as both the product of a new age and a means of change. Though the design MoMA chose was less radical than an earlier, unrealized scheme for a vertical museum commissioned in 1930 from George Howe and William Lescaze, the new building, by Philip Goodwin and Edward Durrell Stone, was everything traditional museums were not. It was modest in size and scale; it was on a side street (West 53rd Street) rather than a prominent avenue; its design was geometric, abstract, and pioneering, like the art it was built to house; and its architects were not (yet) famous. Goodwin and Stone's smooth white-marble building had a flat façade, punctured by ribbon windows and crowned by a flat roof; within were flexible, open-plan galleries and a broad open staircase. MoMA was completed before Washington's grand National Gallery, and was its opposite in almost every way.

Like other American museums, MoMA grew larger over the years, despite its cramped, midblock site and the high cost of land. Philip Johnson, the museum's first Curator of Architecture and Design, who later became an architect, designed an addition in 1951, an exquisite walled sculpture garden two years later, and a second addition with arches framed in black steel in 1964. The expansions, which contained not only new galleries but a cafe and a museum store, marked the beginning of an important trend in museum building—the creation of spaces to attract visitors and raise money rather than to display objects. MoMA's next building campaign (1977–84) was even more ambitious in that regard. It included a 56-story, glass-walled apartment tower of very expensive condominiums whose sale would offset the cost of another expansion and was also intended to shore up the endowment. The tower, designed by Cesar Pelli, who had just become dean of the architecture school at Yale University, was quietly handsome, and the new galleries blended in with the older ones. But this addition had some uncomfortable commercial touches, such as escalators just inside the garden wall. More important, it changed the scale of the museum.

In 1995, MoMA acquired a hotel next door and began assembling adjacent lots for yet another addition—which, when completed, will almost double the museum's size. The committee to select the design took a worldwide tour of architects' offices and projects, and then announced a competition by invitation only. Surprisingly, none of the elder statesmen, or even elder rascals like Eisenman and Gehry, were asked to compete. Yoshi Taniguchi of Japan produced the most subtle, practical, and contextual final scheme, and was chosen from a group of well-known but still emerging architects in their fifties: Wiel Arets, Herzog & de Meuron, Steven Holl, Toyo Ito, Rem Koolhaas, and Yoshio Taniguchi, Bernard Tschumi, Rafael Viñoly, and Tod Williams Billie Tsien and Associates.



Frank Lloyd Wright contemplating a model of his masterful 1959 Guggenheim Museum.

Though it grew more conservative over the years, MoMA was one of the most influential forces in architecture in the second half of the 20th century. It established the importance of architecture as an art. It identified trends, launched reputations, and, in its exhibitions and publications, codified movements. And it helped make *modern* the only acceptable style for museums of modern art (and eventually for all museums and public buildings). As MoMA grew rich and powerful—thanks to the financial, political, and social power of its Rockefeller patrons, an unexcelled collection, and the relocation of the international art world to New

Museums

York after the outbreak of World War II—museums everywhere tried to compete. Only one upstaged it architecturally.

In 1943, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum hired the most famous and provocative architect in the world, Frank Lloyd Wright, to design a new building (which was not begun until 1956). What Wright produced was no quiet marble box on a Manhattan side street. His defiant spiral is right on Fifth Avenue, across the street and a few blocks north of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Guggenheim was completed in 1959, the year of Wright's death, and though its curved ramps proved a challenge to many of the works hung on its walls, it was clearly a masterpiece, one of the greatest museum buildings in the world. With one sweeping gesture, Wright managed to solve the three problems of museum design that had engaged museum architects from the first—procession through space, lighting, and security. A single continuous ramp leads the viewer all the way up (and down) through the core of the Guggenheim—and what a ramp it is! A gigantic skylight floods the interior with natural light that nonetheless does not shine directly on the works of art. And the concrete conch of a building seems impenetrable, except at the glass front door. Wright even managed to tuck in an entrance plaza, a little shop, an underground theater, lavatories on every level, a balcony overlooking Central Park, and facilities for the trustees. The Guggenheim was a very hard act to follow.

By the 1960s, when American art and modern art were one and the same, the Whitney Museum of American Art, which occupied a quiet, boxy brick building designed by Philip Johnson behind MoMA, on 54th Street, set out to make its own statement. The Whitney's trustees hired Marcel Breuer, a highly respected, German-born New York architect and Bauhaus alumnus. Breuer was known for beautifully crafted suburban houses in natural materials and for some subtle college buildings and chapels. But the Whitney Museum he designed (with Hamilton Smith, 1963–66) is relatively bombastic—a massive, hovering pile of stone on the corner of Madison Avenue and East 75th Street in Manhattan, approached by a bridge over an underground terrace. Unlike the Guggenheim, it gets larger as it rises. Within, it features a gargantuan elevator; huge, well-lit, flexible open galleries that at the time accommodated oversized art better than any at MoMA or the Guggenheim; and, set off from the galleries, an enclosed stone staircase—dark, beautiful, mysterious.

The Whitney contained many fresh ideas, but it also owed a lot to Louis I. Kahn's 1951 addition to the Yale Art Gallery in New Haven, Connecticut. Kahn was a generation younger than the architects who were considered the modern masters: the American Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Gropius, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier, the three Europeans who were largely responsible for the boxy, white-walled structures that MoMA promoted as the "International Style." Gropius, who had directed the Bauhaus in

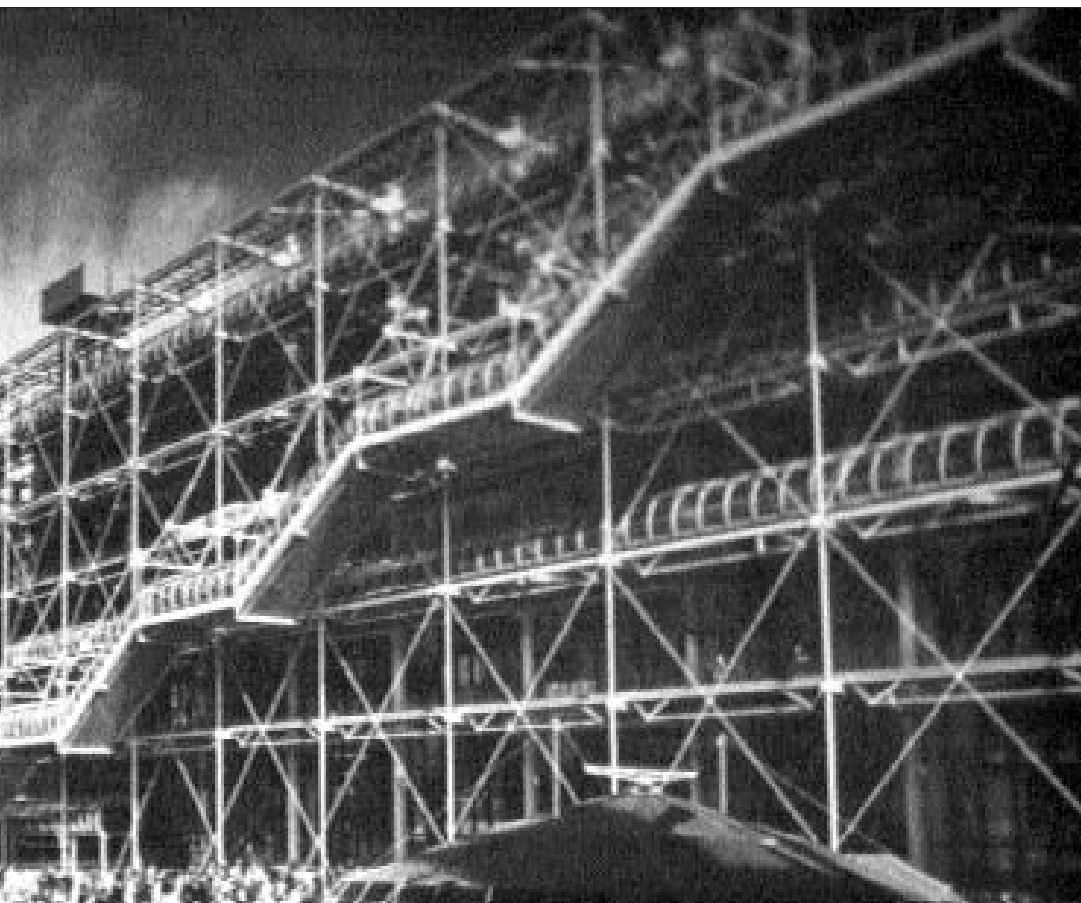
The radical design of the Pompidou Center on the Place Beaubourg in Paris was far more controversial when it opened in 1977 than the contemporary art shown within—or the vibrant street theater without.



Berlin and subsequently headed Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, never designed a significant museum. His influence gradually declined. Le Corbusier grew in stature and range and worked in many materials and with a multiplicity of forms after the 1920s. He created curved shapes as well as rectangles, small enclosed spaces as well as big open ones, in smooth and rough concrete. The Carpenter Art Center at Harvard (with Sert, Jackson, Gourley, 1963), not a museum exactly but a building designed to display art, is one example of his lively and varied late work.

Mies, who succeeded Gropius at the Bauhaus, moved to the United States and became dean of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. He perfected the steel-framed, glass-walled box filled with what he called "universal space," and he adapted it, exquisitely, to all purposes. His museums include the unbuilt Museum for a Small City (1942), an addition to the Houston Museum of Fine Arts (1951–58), and the New National Gallery in Berlin (1962–68), an enormous glass pavilion with temporary partitions and underground galleries. Mies's influence on every kind of building—office towers (such as the Seagram Building in New York), apartment houses, schools—was so ubiquitous that it eventually provoked the reaction of postmodernism.

As Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies achieved old-master status in the 1950s, attention in America turned to the next generation of *American* architects, and



especially to Kahn. A Philadelphia-based professor, he was almost 50 years old when he received his first important commission: to design an 84,000-square-foot addition to the neo-Gothic Yale Art Gallery. The addition, completed in 1953, defers to the decorative exterior of the original gallery adjacent to it by meeting the street with a plain brick wall, marked only by a glass door set perpendicularly between two planes of the façade, along which horizontal bands denote the floor levels. Inside, the building has a Miesian open plan with movable “Pogo panels” on little feet for the display of paintings and a gridded, exposed-concrete ceiling, textured like the work of Le Corbusier, but open so that the mechanical systems inside are visible. Though the building’s triangular ceiling structure derives from theories of the architect-engineer Buckminster Fuller, classical proportions govern its design. Kahn made something new from these influences, and something right for the time.

He subsequently received a number of important commissions, including the Kimball Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas (1967–72), and the Yale British Art Center in New Haven (1969–77), directly across the street from the Yale Art Gallery. Both are lighted with elaborate systems of baffles that block the sun’s harmful rays and create a kind of palpable space inside.

Almost contemporaneous with the British Art Center was a museum that, though less awe inspiring, was even more celebrated: the Georges Pompidou National Art and Cultural Center (1971–77), in Paris, designed by Renzo Piano of Genoa and Richard Rogers of London. In many ways, the Pompidou—a big glass box that resembles a 19th-century industrial exhibition hall rather than a museum—is completely different from the British Art Center, and yet it too was influenced by Kahn’s Yale Art Gallery addition. Kahn had exposed the ductwork in the Yale Art Gallery; Piano and Rogers enlarged the Pompidou’s ductwork to Brobdingnagian scale and placed it on the exterior of the building, where escalators within tubes carry visitors along the façade to the upper floors. Shiny metal, glass, and primary-color plastic make the building look like a gigantic Tinkertoy. People loved it from the start, and it suited the exhibitions of its day, but as fashions changed and the Pompidou became the home of the national collection of modern art, curators began to complain that the building was not functional because it had open spaces instead of defined rooms. So the galleries were rebuilt in the 1980s by Gae Aulenti, an Italian architect—who was also hired in the 1980s to turn a vast train terminal in Paris, the Gare d’Orsay, into a vast museum of 19th-century art. The Pompidou was one of the first museum buildings to become a tourist attraction and almost singlehandedly transformed its once-dreary neighborhood. It draws some eight million visitors a year.

The building that most captivated the American public in the 1970s was I. M. Pei & Partners’ addition to the National Gallery in Washington, the so-called East Building, completed in 1978. Composed of a pair of isosceles triangles, this elegant, abstract structure cleverly fills an awkward trapezoidal site on the National Mall. It is sheathed in marble from the same quarry as the marble used for its great neoclassical neighbor, but it relates to the original museum largely by contrast. Instead of applying ornament, Pei made the whole building a piece of sculpture. Like other museum additions of the time, it is devot-



Paul Stevenson Oles' study of the much admired East Building of the National Gallery of Art.

ed less to gallery space (galleries are tucked away in the corners) than to office space, subterranean restaurants with light entering from little glass pyramids that poke above ground, and public meeting space (in the form of a gigantic, glass-roofed lobby atrium). In part, no doubt, because of the acclaim the East Building had received, Pei was asked in 1984 to renovate and expand the Louvre. The \$1.38 billion project added 825,000 square feet of space (less than half of it for galleries) to the venerable museum, largely in the form of underground facilities lighted through an enormous pyramid in the courtyard above.

Louis Kahn's late work exerted much more influence on architects in the United States than either the Pompidou or the East Building. The classical tradition that Kahn had successfully integrated with modernism came into favor in the 1980s as a reaction to Miesian restraint and the stripped-down boxes it inspired. Robert Venturi—like Kahn, a Philadelphia architect who had taught at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale—led the postmodern revolt. Venturi argued that modern architecture was meaningless because, without ornament, it lacked necessary symbols. He and his partner, John Rauch, put the theory into practice in an addition to Cass Gilbert's 1917 Allen Memorial Art Gallery at Oberlin College. They added large-scale, patterned brickwork and columns with gigantic capitals, flattened out and inflated in size for effect.

Venturi brought to architecture not just a sense of irony but a sense of humor. With his wife, Denise Scott Brown, he later designed a larger, far more prominent, and much more complex museum addition than the one at Oberlin: the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery. Venturi and Scott Brown placed well-proportioned individual galleries in the new wing, used restrained ornament, and paid careful attention to the building's side on

Trafalgar Square. The Sainsbury Wing was completed in 1991. Venturi's cleverest museum is a 1972 re-creation of Benjamin Franklin's house in Philadelphia, of which only the footprint and the roofline were known. So that is all Venturi built—a three-dimensional outline. The exhibits are in sheds and underground passageways.

Though the Franklin project parodied the desire to turn back the clock, many converts to the postmodern movement tried to do just that. The office-building boom of the 1980s proceeded with insufficient time for reflection, and much of what was built was unimaginative and shoddy. The most controversial museum project of the era was a proposed addition to the Whitney Museum by Michael Graves—a hulking, brooding pile of colored classical forms that, though handsome and original, tried to dwarf Breuer's building. The proposal elicited such a powerful defense of the original Whitney from architects that it actually strengthened Breuer's reputation and advanced the cause of modern architecture. (Curiously, a Gwathmey Siegel addition [1985–92] to Wright's Guggenheim Museum received little criticism, mainly because, though large, it was respectful and unassertive—and located where Wright himself had once contemplated an addition.)

While the battle of the styles raged on the East Coast, on the West Coast and in Europe modern architecture never really went out of style, and two of the most important commissions of the 1980s, which both happened to be in California, went to modernists. The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art hired the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki to design a new building in the arts district downtown, and, after considering 80 architects, the Getty Center selected Richard Meier of New York to design its \$1 billion, 360,000-square-foot complex on a 110-acre site looming over the Santa Monica Freeway. Neither commission went to the sentimental hometown favorite, Frank Gehry, who for many years had designed studios for artists and was highly respected within the art world. But in a sense, Gehry ended up winning the first competition when he was asked to convert two industrial sheds to a "Temporary Contemporary" (now called the Geffen Contemporary) on the edge of downtown Los Angeles. Gehry's big open space with exposed roof trusses and a raw feeling was such a success that Isozaki's more costly and "permanent" museum seemed anticlimatic when it opened a few years later.

Meier's huge, buff-stone, much-anticipated Getty opened at almost the same time as Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim. Meier had never abandoned his commitment to an abstract, white-walled, spatially complex form of modern architecture derived from Le Corbusier's early work; he had, in fact, become the master of the mode. The Getty was highly praised and wildly popular with visitors, but the museum in Bilbao stole the show and became an international phenomenon. Even before that happened, Gehry's star had been rising. He completed a lively California Aerospace Museum and Theater in Los Angeles, had a major retrospective at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, was invited to design the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota and the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, and began to be

embraced by the critical establishment in New York.

The 1980s also saw a carefully orchestrated reaction from within the modernist camp itself to the reductivism of modern architecture. It was led by Peter Eisenman, who spoke (rather opaquely) of being inspired by deconstructionist literary theory. In 1988, Philip Johnson put together an exhibition of “deconstructivist architecture” at MoMA that was meant to suggest that a new movement was afoot. None actually materialized, but for a time there was a lot of talk about “decon” architecture. The true importance of Johnson’s show may have been that it advanced the careers of all the participants—Eisenman, Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi—a group that forms the core of those considered for major museum commissions even today.

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The completion of two museum projects designed in the late 1980s helped reestablish modernism in New York. One was a garden court linking the Renaissance revival Pierpont Morgan Library, designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1906, with a taller, Italianate brownstone house of 1853 that had once belonged to Morgan’s son. Instead of making the connection “match” either building, Bartholomew Voorsanger created a glass-and-steel pavilion with a piano-curve roof that owed more to Le Corbusier than to Alberti. And because he believed that shoddy materials and careless craftsmanship were partially responsible for the disillusion with modern architecture, Voorsanger made his pavilion as sumptuous as the old buildings it linked by installing gray-veined marble floors, Indiana limestone walls with pewter-clad aluminum panels and mullions, a row of olive trees, and climbing fig vines. The place soothes even as it dazzles.

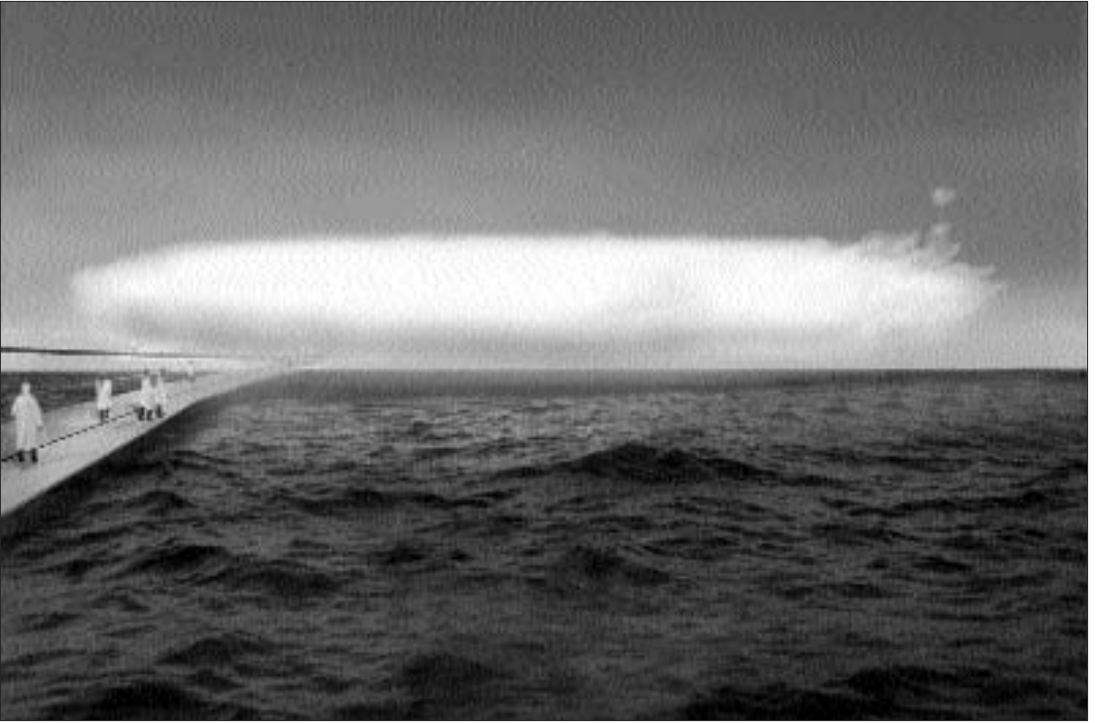
The second project preceded the completion of the Morgan court. In 1987 Richard Gluckman, an architect who had been designing commercial art galleries and working with artists for many years, took a different approach to building a new museum with a design commissioned by the Dia Foundation. Housed in a brick warehouse on the industrial western edge of Manhattan’s Chelsea district, the Dia Center retains the direct, raw quality of the structure and the neighborhood; its plain-concrete interior walls are reconfigured into large, well-proportioned, divisible galleries and enhanced by lighting from exposed industrial fixtures. Gluckman’s spare but beautifully lighted galleries resemble the studios where art is made, and they reproduce the essentials of studio space with subtle detail. Soon after the Dia Center opened, the principal contemporary art galleries in New York started moving from SoHo to Chelsea, and Gluckman found himself invited to design museums the world over. He has joined the surprisingly small and completely international group of contenders for choice museum commissions, made up of veterans of the MoMA “deconstructivist architecture” show, participants in the competition for MoMA’s latest addition, and architects of the most celebrated museums of the 1990s.

There was considerable variety in the museums designed in that

decade (some of which are only now being completed), as evidenced, for example, by the Polshek Partnership's planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, a fully transparent, machinelike glass cage with a gigantic, solid-white sphere seemingly suspended inside (it actually stands on little legs that look as if they were built to hold a spaceship); Tod Williams Bille Tsien and Associates' sagebrush-green precast concrete addition to the Phoenix Art Museum and new bronze-coated American Museum of Folk Art in New York City; Antoine Predock's Arizona Science Center in Phoenix and Tang Teaching Museum at Skidmore College; Mario Botta's brick-and-granite San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Santiago Calatrava's soaring addition to the Milwaukee Museum, which, in addition to its new galleries and reception spaces, literally creates a bridge to the downtown.

Of a quite different character are the numerous commemorative museums that opened during the decade, such as James Ingo Freed's United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (1993), stony and contextual on one side, foreboding on the other, and inside, elements from concentration camps, such as oven doors, communicate visually and viscerally. David Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (1998) disturbs visitors with angular dead-end spaces, narrow lightning-bolt windows, and a zigzagging plan with a 13-foot-wide void that symbolizes the missing Jews and the contributions they never got to make. The exquisite zinc-skinned structure is an abstract chamber of horrors. (One reason the Bilbao Guggenheim was such a sensation is that its exuberance made it the polar opposite of the memorial museums, just as its intertwined curves and endless complexity set it apart from all the understated art museums of the time.)

The goal of much museum architecture today is to stun, and what could be more shocking than a museum that doesn't exist in any traditional physical sense? Of course, the idea is not new. It was advanced by Walter Benjamin in the famous essay "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), by André Malraux in *Museum without Walls* (1947), and by Marcel Duchamp in "Boîte-en-Valise" (1936–41), a box filled with reproductions of his work—in multiple editions, of course. Today it takes the form of the Virtual Guggenheim, an electronic "museum" filled with reproductions of the Guggenheim's holdings. Its colorful, curvaceous, ever-morphing forms were created by architects Lisa-Anne Couture and Hani Rashid, partners in Asymptote Architecture, for "visits" from computer terminals. Similarly ephemeral is the marvelously named Blur Building, a planned exposition pavilion in Lake Neuchâtel at Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland. The design is the work of Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, who were recently selected to design the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Boston. The Blur Building, accessible by a ramp from the lakeshore, will be sprayed by a mist that makes it seem to disappear. The North Carolina Museum of Art, by New York architects Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson, is fully visible only from high in the air: At that distance, its various structures and fields can be seen to spell out "Picture This."



Visitors will approach the planned Blur Building on Switzerland's Lake Neuchâtel across a ramped bridge. It will deposit them on an open-air platform in the center of a manmade fog mass.

The evidence is overwhelming: Museums are no longer just repositories of treasures or “cabinets of curiosities”; they have become objects in their own right. During the past decade, the exotic has invaded a building type that used to be, quite properly, the most conservative of all—because it was intended to conserve artifacts for the ages. But museums today do not merely conserve. They entertain, feed patrons, sell wares, host parties, and make displays, if not out of whole cloth and real objects, then out of whole bytes and digits. (The richest man in the world, Bill Gates, has assembled a collection of art and books not to enjoy or display them as much as to own the legal rights to reproduce them.) And when museums educate these days, they may well do so using reproductions, films, and video displays rather than original artifacts. That’s a risky course for them to take when more information than anyone can absorb is already coming into homes and schools electronically.

At a time when schools are deteriorating, roads are crumbling, and low-income housing is woefully underfunded, one can’t help but question the vast sums being spent on new museums (\$650 million for the MoMA addition; almost \$1 billion sought for a proposed new Gehry Guggenheim in New York). But the extravagance is certainly good for the art of architecture and for the few architects who get the chance to build museums. The artist Frank Stella said of Victoria Newhouse’s book *Towards a New Museum* (1998) that “it reveals how well the guys in suits who can’t paint perform when they have to design a home for art.” Increasingly, the guys in suits are getting to upstage the guys who can paint. □