

The Art of Architecture



When you think of New York City, skyscraper is a word that comes to mind. Towering steel structures like the bevel-skinned Chrysler Building and the ill-fated solidity of the Twin Towers have defined the city's iconic skyline.

But in a city where the skyscrapers are part of its striving, ambitious DNA, it's New York's modern art museums that take the art of building to new levels.

On a recent trip to New York City, I visited three temples of contemporary art - the Guggenheim, the New Museum and the Whitney. Each are striking examples of design where form and function come together in harmony.

Not only do they each embody the spirit of contemporary art, which is all about pushing boundaries, challenging the status quo and asking questions but they directly affect the journey of human beings who enter.

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

On the periphery of Central Park stands the granddaddy of contemporary art museum design in New York. Designed by the renowned American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, it's a living, breathing monument to his philosophy of "organic architecture". Wright believed that a building should compliment its environment so as to create a single unified space that appears to "grow naturally" out of the ground.

I'd like to have a free architecture. I'd like to have architecture that belonged where you see it standing, and was a grace to the landscape instead of a disgrace.

- Frank Lloyd Wright

Surrounded by brick mansions, brownstones and middling office buildings, the Guggenheim's white, curved structure and smooth concrete walls painted an off-white should stick out like a sore thumb but instead it makes the other buildings look like they've been plunked down by happenstance.



Arriving through the low-lying entrance into the large rotunda, your eye is drawn upwards to the circular oculus in the centre of the domed ceiling 96 feet above. The oculus originated in antiquity - Rome's Pantheon is the world's most prominent example - and its purpose is two-fold - to let light in but also to let those in the temple contemplate the heavens.

In 1943, Hilla Rebay, the first director and the curator of the museum contacted Wright about her ideas for a designated home for the collection which was devoted to non-objective or more commonly known as abstract art.

"Could you ever come to New York and discuss with me a building for our collection of Non-objective paintings," she wrote. "I want a temple of spirit—a monument, and your help to make it possible."

With the oculus, Wright created the feeling that you are entering a sanctum of sorts - in this case the sanctum of art and the ideas and feelings it can invoke.

Wright went further to enhance this temple of art and spirit with the six-ramped spiral floors that flank the rotunda.



Wright's intention was for visitors to take the elevator to the top floor and wind their way down each spiral. The experience of moving around the floors looking at the art on the walls is not dissimilar to the practice of walking a labyrinth that have been associated with spiritual and magical experiences for centuries.



Another of Wright's principles of his philosophy of "organic architecture" is opening up spaces and making them fluid and continuous.

At the Guggenheim, experiencing the challenge of the modern art on the walls with the meditative quality invoked by walking a predestined path is a heady

one. Your senses are engaged on multiple levels as you move through the space but the overall feeling is one of openness.

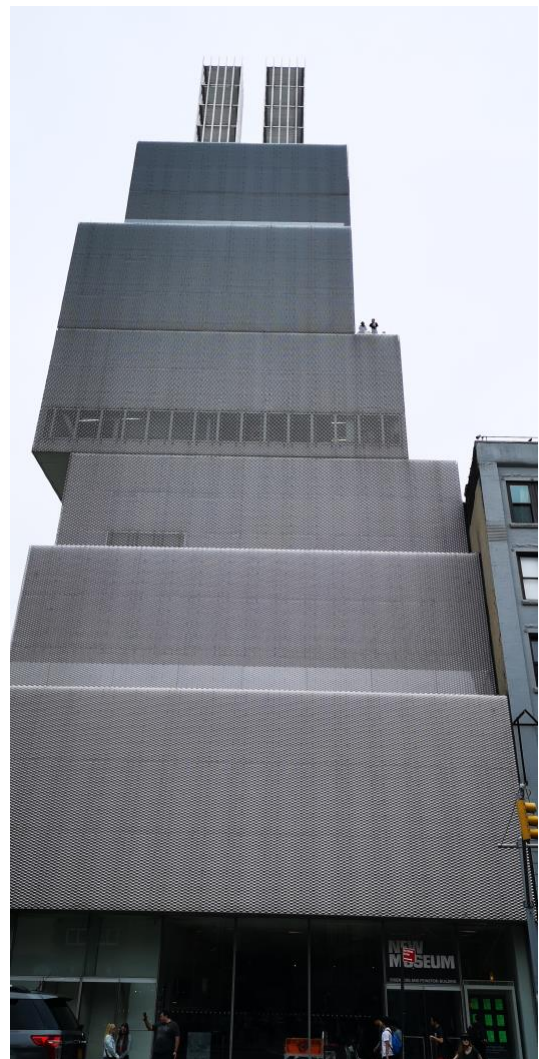
As you move down the predestined path, art you've seen close up can then be seen from a distance from across the rotunda. You can also look down from the various levels to experience the art from another vantage point. And unlike the more traditional art museums with linear structures - you don't feel like you are jockeying for position to view the pieces. By contrast, you can experience a feeling of oneness with the other people in the gallery.

According to architectural historian and critic Paul Goldberger, *"Wright's building made it socially and culturally acceptable for an architect to design a highly expressive, intensely personal museum. In this sense almost every museum of our time is a child of the Guggenheim."*

Frank Lloyd Wright's most iconic building was also one of his last. He died at 92, six months before the reinforced-concrete spiral opened in October 21, 1959.

NEW MUSEUM

Just west of trendy Soho is The Bowery - a seemingly dilapidated area of New York that has a long storied past. In the 17th century it was farmland before rapid urbanization took hold and it became the stomping grounds for one of American's earliest and infamous street gangs - the Bowery Boys. Until the 1990s it was New York's "Skid Row" but also the home to emerging artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Herring.



There's been a movement to revitalize the area over the last 20 or so years and one of the shining beacons is the New Museum - the only art museum in New York City dedicated solely to the work of living artists.

In existence since 1977, the New Museum's dedicated building opened in 2007. The Pritzker Architecture Prize winning Tokyo-based duo Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of SANAA designed it. SANAA is lauded for exploring the relationship between the inside and the outside and reflecting a building's individual location in their design.

The Bowery initially gave Sejima and Nishizawa pause. *"The Bowery was very gritty when we first visited it,"* they said. *"We were a bit shocked, but we were also impressed that a fine art museum wanted to be there. In the end, the Bowery and the New Museum have a lot in common. Both have a history of being very accepting, open, embracing of every idiosyncrasy in an unprejudiced manner...The New Museum is a combination of elegant and urban. We were determined to make a building that felt like that."*



Rising seven-stories sandwiched in the midst of nondescript buildings, the eight-level structure is a series of stacked boxes set at slightly different angles clad in what looks like a perforated silver casing that shimmers in the light. From a distance, I could see figures of people on what appeared to be the fifth box up. At first I thought they were mannequins - part of an installation perhaps? But then they moved and I realized there was a terrace and I decided that's where I wanted to start my visit. But first I had to go inside.

Outside the ground floor has an expansive picture window right at street level that invites passers-by to experience the rotating art installation and the inner workings of the main lobby. This is a prime example of SANAA's focus on the relationship between the inside and the outside. By breaking down the barriers visually from the street to the building - you are imbued with a sense of welcoming, a promise that what you'll find inside will be eye-opening and thought provoking.

The lobby is flanked on the left side with two large cargo elevators encased inside with vibrant neon green reflective glass. They are one of the only pops of colour inside the museum - the other are the Bisazza tile super graphics in the bathrooms which cover the walls with vividly hued, pixelated cherry blossom patterns.

If the Guggenheim experience is one of forward meditative movement and different perspectives - the use of the elevators to go from floor to floor at the New Museum nurtures a feeling of anticipation every time the doors slide open. What will be on the other side?

Stepping out onto the sixth floor, which is also known as the “Sky Room” you are faced with a floor to ceiling glass atrium with views to the city. There’s no art on display here - as the room is used for events - but the cityscapes seen on each side are a type of homage to the art of the living, breathing city. Stepping out onto the wrap-around balcony, the views are unfettered and once again give you the sense of openness and exploration - so integral to contemporary art.

One of the most striking floors is the fourth floor gallery which at nearly 4000 square feet has the smallest footprint but the tallest ceilings - measuring 24 feet in height.

Offsetting the vertical expansiveness is a skylight that permits natural light to wash through the galleries during the day. The structural steel beams are exposed - a deliberate design decision by SAANA for the entire building.

We want to show what the building is made of and maximize the feeling of openness, but do it in a beautiful way inside the parameters of the toughness.

The feeling of openness and toughness gives the New Museum the opportunity to curate art installations that have a magnitude and dramatic impact on the visitor.

On my visit, a retrospective of sculptor Nari Ward’s work was on display. On the fourth floor gallery was his breathtaking Carpet Angel. On the floor is a mound of carpet scraps, empty plastic bottles and other debris while above, suspended from the 24 foot ceiling is an abstract angel with spread wings made of carpet pieces, plastic shopping bags and other junk.

If contemporary art is at its core explorative and adventurous - then the New Museum’s architectural design provides a fitting container. It is one of SAANA’s most celebrated projects and one that no doubt contributed to their Pritzker Prize win.

For the creation of buildings that successfully interact with their contexts and the activities they contain, creating a sense of fullness and experiential richness....

- Pritzker Prize Jury citation



WHITNEY MUSEUM

Architecture is art, but art vastly contaminated by many other things. Contaminated in the best sense of the word—fed, fertilized by many things.

- Renzo Piano

Perched on the edge of the Hudson River with Lady Liberty in the distance and overlooking the Highline in the midst of the decidedly industrial Meatpacking District is the Whitney Museum - one of the oldest modern art museums in New York City.



Founded in 1930, nine years before the Guggenheim, its building is actually one of the newest and has garnered as much criticism as praise. It was designed by Renzo Piano, the architect behind the pioneering Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

The Pompidou's inside-out industrial design which focussed on the guts and inner workings of the building with the externalization of its load-bearing structure and colourfully painted circulation systems was controversial during its unveiling. Today, it is a much loved fixture of the City of Lights and an emblem to modernism. It's a gathering place as much as a place for art.

As I walked towards the Whitney, with sunlight glinting off the river, I entered the cantilevered entrance which transforms the area outside into a large sheltered public space - echoes of the

Pompidou. I could see through the building and out to the windows to the Hudson River.

The entrance gave me an expansive and optimistic feeling that the art I was going to see inside was going to be grand in spirit and bustling with energy and possibility.

Inside, the Whitney has the largest footprint of the three museums - 50,000 square feet, with 13,000 square feet of outdoor exhibition spaces and terraces. One of the two upper galleries devoted to special exhibitions is 18,000 square feet, making it the largest column-free museum gallery in New York City.

The size and scope of the special gallery makes it



ideal to display large canvasses and statues. American art has a palatable expansive quality. It's a country that's founded by revolution and while that may not always be a comforting aesthetic - it is nevertheless exhilarating.

Being able to stand in one spot in the gallery, turn 360 and examine large canvasses unfettered by any obstacles is bracing. And with the light streaming in from outside as it's reflected from the river you can't help but be infected with the feeling of potential.

For some critics, the outdoor terraces with their views over the city are detractors to the art inside. Justin Davidson wrote in *New York Magazine*, "*Piano seems to be wondering whether intense communion with art is still enough to keep the public engaged. Maybe a perpetually distracted audience demands even more distractions. Majestic windows and broad terraces beckon visitors to step outside for a view of the museum's native turf...The new Whitney is a wonderful place for people who get easily bored by art.*"



But I would argue rather than the terraces serving as a distraction for the perpetual hyperactive lack of focus that we all can experience in this era - the access to the city via the terraces heightens the overall experience. Modern art is not just about art for art's sake but rather what feelings and thoughts it provokes in the

viewer. As I stepped outside and breathed in the city, I was also able to let the feelings about what the art pieces invoked sink in. And that's hardly being distracted.

According to Piano, "*The design for the new museum emerges equally from a close study of the Whitney's needs and from a response to this remarkable site. We wanted to draw on its vitality and at the same time enhance its rich character.*"

While I can't say that the new Whitney has the organic grandeur of the Guggenheim, or the edgy sleekness of the New Museum, the virtue of the architecture is that more so than the others it makes the most of its setting. Here you have the heady sense of art connecting with the muscular imagination of city and vice versa and you, the visitor, are part of the moving canvass.

Art can renew the spirit but so too can the buildings that house it.