. . . AND IT'S BIG AND BEAUTIFUL

Redesigned Museum Is Good Architecture, Fine Cityscape

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IF anyone had ever doubted that the Museum of Modern Art is a big girl now—she's 35 and wearing her years lightly—it was confirmed this week with the opening of the twice-as-big, twich-as-good, $5.5 million remodeled building with two new wings and a spectacularly enlarged garden. She's not only big, she's beautiful.

As an institution, the museum projects the standards that have come to mean the real New York big time: a costly, substantial sophistication, an electric, worldly elegance, and the poised, polished cultivation of the newest, latest and best that the city has to offer. It's all done superbly, so that other institutions, even good ones, seem like bumbling country cousins by comparison.

The new museum—because virtually everything is new except the original structure's facade and the familiar basement auditorium with its red velvet seats and sinister subway rumbles—is just about as perfect for its purposes and as expressive of its standards as any structure could be.

Polished Design

Designed by Philip Johnson, an architect as poised and polished as the building, it is one of New York's most subtly effective structures, its refined simplicity quietly understating the care of its detailing and the sensitivity of its relationships to older buildings and commercial and residential neighbors. It is successful not only as architecture, but also as cityscape, an area in which architects commit their most serious crimes.

The original 1939 building by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone remains substantially as it was outside, a historic example of the International Style that was the *dernier cri* in the museum's early days. Later offices, also by Philip Johnson, are to the west, and the new gallery wing is to the east.

The other new building, the garden wing, is almost completely underground. Designed to house the Museum's art classes, it is actually below the raised, extended east end of the garden. Its top is a large, paved plaza, reached by shallow, ceremonial marble stairs that suggest an austerely luxurious, contemporary version of baroque Rome.

The outdoor "walls" surrounding the garden are the existing buttresses of St. Thomas's Church and the dull rear of Canada House. They are well-integrated into the new design—another sensitive area in which many architects trip and fall, preferring to ignore what God or other architects have done before them.

Sympathetic Remodeling

The enlarged garden, with a series of stepped levels, pools, fountains and some pretty magnificent, large-scale sculpture is fine esthetically and equally fine as an example of the way expensive midtown land can be "wasted" by leaving it open for the pleasure of people—a practice that few real estate men tolerate or understand.

The new gallery wing is black steel and amber-gray glass on the 53rd street side, glass and steel and buff brick facing the garden.

If steel can be said to be subtle and sensuous, it is here Painstakingly detailed, with curved corners against the glass, projecting and recessed sections and stiffening beams as elegant as marble columns, the effect is a tasteful enrichment of the museum's earlier flat facades. An artful setback makes a delicate arcade on the ground floor garden front.

The all-glass and metal facade has not been handled in such handsome fashion since the vogue for cast-iron fronts in the late 19th century. Many of those beautiful old buildings blush unseen today under layers of grime in New York's shabby commercial neighborhoods.

The point is that the museum has not "modernized" itself in the conventional sense —one of the most atrocious of architectural practices — but shows a clear, consecutive, compatible sequence of evolving tastes within a period of dynamic architectural change. (A "modernized" Museum of Modern Art may be kind of comment on our times.) It provides a lesson in proper relationships through scale and detail rather than through refacing the old and "frosting" the new with matching materials. Together, the three sections are a prime demonstration of how not to make buildings swear at each other or their surroundings.

Beyond its sleek refinement, the most commendable feature of the design is the sensibility with which the additions have been made. Instead of brutal building blocks smacked down to plug open spaces, they are a calculated means of preserving and expanding those spaces, while adding 15,000 square feet for the collections.

Inside, the most significant architectural change is the entrance lobby, which represents just about the total area of the former ground floor galleries. It is expansive and impressive with a glass wall to the garden—a good demonstration of the Johnsonian talent for entrances and exits. The additional downstairs galleries house changing exhibitions, with permanent collections installed on the upper floors.

Important Additions

The gallery interiors are largely more of the same as before, a big-museum instead of a small-museum maze of temporarily or semi-permanently partitioned, pristine white spaces containing a stunning, comprehensive collection of the esthetic avant-garde from "period" examples to the present. The important additions are the new galleries for photographs, graphics and architecture and design, so impeccably installed and full of freshly-revealed gems that it makes the museum's previous wailing and hand-wringing about its hidden collections quite comprehensible. They are a distinguished addition and dramatic asset. The word for all of this —architecture, interiors and displays — is professional, in its highest and most knowledgeable sense; the ultimate compliment in a field rife with uneasy dilettantism.