What Should a Museum Be?

It should, says a critic, be a fusion of art and architecture. But, in many new examples, they threaten not to fuse.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

SIX months—and more than half a million paid admissions—after the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum opened its plate-glass doors on Fifth Avenue to a fanfare of publicity, the controversy it set off continues to rage. The Guggenheim, final, flamboyant gesture of the late Frank Lloyd Wright, has been hailed as a masterpiece, attacked as an atrocity, called the finest museum of all time and denounced as no museum at all. Some critics have termed its stunning circular hall "a crime against painting and sculpture"; others have saluted it as "one of the greatest rooms in history."

The controversy clearly is a conflict between art and architecture. Is this extraordinary and exhilarating structure appropriate for its primary purpose—the display of works of art? Does its eccentric design enhance or eclipse the objects on view? Is its overwhelming strength and style unfair competition? Serious or superficial, all discussion leads inevitably to the basic question: "What should a museum be?"

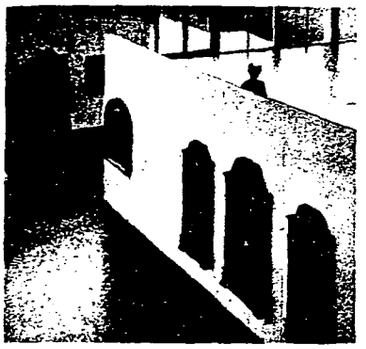
It is an insistent question, because the Guggenheim's box-office success dramatically reflects a current cultural phenomenon: the museum building boom. The roster of museum designers reads like a Who's Who of architecture. In the United States, Mies van der Rohe recently completed a large hall for the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. Philip C. Johnson has four projects under way—the almost-finished Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, N. Y., the Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Tex., the Sheldon Art Gallery at Lincoln, Neb., and the projected new wing for New York's Museum of Modern Art.

Edward D. Stone has prepared working drawings for Huntington Hartford's new Gallery of Modern Art on Columbus Circle. Minoru Yamasaki has proposed an addition to the Detroit Institute of Arts. Museum facilities are part of Eero Saarinen's prize-winning National Jefferson Expansion Memorial project awaiting execution in St. Louis. Le Corbusier has completed museum buildings in Tokyo and in Ahmedabad, India. Work is soon to start on Oscar Niemeyer's new art center for Caracas.

THE contrast between these projects and the buildings that have come to mean "museum" in the popular mind is striking. The familiar fine-arts museums—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and points west—were constructed from the Eighteen Eighties to the Nineteen Thirties. They followed a familiar formula of colonnaded, neoclassic façades. Their impressive shells masked a labyrinth of monumental rooms and vast flights of marble steps, haunted by the specter of museum fatigue.

These majestic monuments were the heirs of the original "museums," the palaces of European princes whose remarkable personal artistic treasuries are best preserved in collections like Madrid's Prado and Paris' Louvre.

OLD—The Metropolitan Museum in New York masses its treasures in traditional style.



NEW—Cullinan Hall, in Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, typifies the open-floor plan.

UNIQUE—New York's Guggenheim Museum displays its works along a spiral ramp.

At best, such collections were massed magnificence; at worst, indescribable clutter. Whether the installations were good or bad, the buildings offered advantages that are hard to equal today: impressively proportioned galleries, clearly organized plans and unrestricted space.

With the years, however, have come basic changes in museum functions. No longer passive picture galleries, they offer today active programs of instruction, entertainment and participation in their own and related fields. Older institutions have had to resort to massive remodeling to meet these modern needs. Among the new structures, the revolution in the museum's role has been matched by a revolution in the museum's design.

THE modern museums make no obeisance to the architectural status symbols of the past—the classic columns, pediments, friezes and embellishing academic statuary that were the universal trademarks of the public edifice. Permanent galleries have been replaced by open floors partitioned to suit the needs of changing exhibitions, or by unconventional schemes like the Guggenheim's winding spiral ramp, intended to offer entirely new answers to the old relationships of people looking at pictures.

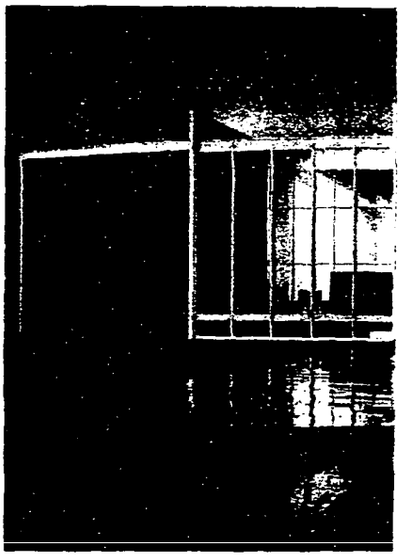
The new buildings are startling, even shocking, in appearance. They follow no set architectural formula; each designer offers his own idea of the best way to house the museum's updated functions. The temptation to turn a structure into a personal statement occasionally has proved irresistible. The inevitable result is a conflict between the building and its contents.

This conflict is distressingly evident in most of the new museums. In the case of Wright's building, the architectural statement is so bold and so personal that only Director James Johnson Sweeney's special lighting and hanging save the collection from being blotted out. In spite of Sweeney's firm belief that "a good museum is like an iceberg, one-tenth above the surface, nine-tenths below," Wright sacrificed almost all necessary study and storage areas to his personal delight in the great concrete spiral shell. Whatever couldn't be tucked into an odd, pie-shaped corner was simply eliminated, in the name of architecture.

WHETHER Wright's unique idea of channeling the visitors past the collection along an inexorable, winding ramp is worth these functional sacrifices is debatable. The fact that he chose to call the building an "archeseum" is indication enough of his lifelong conviction that architecture is the "mother art" beyond which little else concerned him.

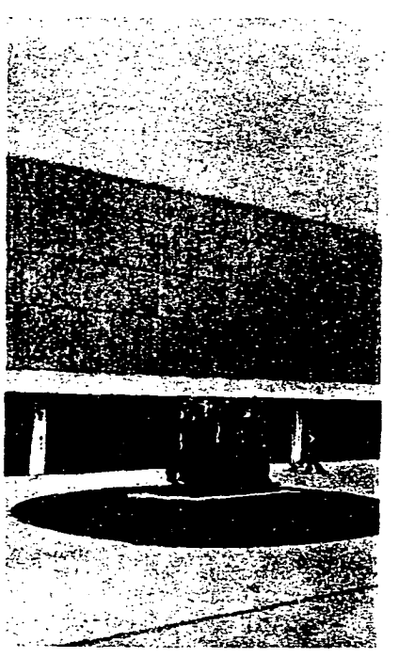
Mies van der Rohe's huge hall for Houston, achieved by filling in the open end of an existing U-shaped building, is one of this master architect's great rooms—designed like a jewel, painstaking in the exquisite detail of its structure, impressive in its serene monumentality. Yet it presents equally impressive installation problems because *(Continued on Page 47)*

NEW CONCEPTS IN



Cullinan Hall,

Model of the proposed



Tokyo's National Museum of Western Art (1959); Le Corbusier, architect.

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE, a freelance writer on art and architecture, is the author of a recent book on Italian architect Pier Luigi Nervi.

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of its undivided space, thirty-foot ceiling and outsized proportions.

Its flexible, open plan, a scheme pioneered by New York's Museum of Modern Art, is best on paper, where one can play intriguing space games with a pencil and put up or knock down walls with an eraser. Actually, temporary partitions are expensive, hard to fireproof and seldom well-finished. If walls are made movable to create spaces ranging from intimate to monumental, it follows logically that ceilings should be movable, too, to provide proper scale and lighting within changing room sizes. In addition, because the flexible plan requires a director who must double as a designer, the result can be magnificent—or a mess.

PEOPLE'S CHOICE

What is the reason for the phenomenal popularity of the Guggenheim Museum, which continues to attract more than 3,000 visitors a day? According to Harry F. Guggenheim, president of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, the unprecedented attendance is due only partly to the fact that the building is a well-publicized curiosity.

"People come initially because of the great controversy, and because they have been Frank Lloyd Wright-educated," says Mr. Guggenheim. "They are attracted by the museum's novel forms. But they come back because they are inspired and delighted with what they see. We believe that the building is both beautiful and functional, and that the architect has devised a revolutionary method of interest and value for viewing art. Its overwhelming acceptance indicates that the public agrees with us. We're planning for a million visitors a year."

Both of Le Corbusier's museums, at Tokyo and Ahmedabad, show just as much preoccupation with the creation of dominating architectural forms as with matters of hanging and lighting. These abstract architectural exercises have been called "exhibitions of columns" by the Museum of Modern Art's Arthur Drexler: smaller works of art fight a losing battle against "sculpture" on this scale.

The up-ended pyramid which Niemeyer has planned for Caracas is so arresting that it will command the spectator's attention, very possibly at the expense of the art it will house. The arcades and framing fili-

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gree that are Edward Stone's increasingly insistent trademarks will make his Gallery of Modern Art an effective architectural billboard before the visitor even enters.

Museum men and architects seem to be in irreconcilable disagreement over their goals. The most outspoken directors say frankly that they don't want "architecture" at all. Firmly united against anything that will compete or achieve equal status with the objects on view, they share a common fear of overwhelming buildings.

THE Museum of Modern Art's director René d'Harnoncourt believes that "the first function of a museum is to make works of art understandable and available to the public." Sweeney of the Guggenheim unequivocally agrees: "The museum exists for the work of art. The architect's job is to solve the problems as clearly and pungently as possible, not to make monuments. A well-proportioned room is the best place to hang pictures." With understandable urgency from a man who has had to make his peace with Frank Lloyd Wright, Sweeney pleads for modesty, for architects who will "under-design."

James J. Rorimer, head of New York's vast, treasure-gorged Metropolitan, says, "A museum should not be conceived as an architectural landmark. The work of art itself is the chief consideration. I have no interest in a work of art as a background. To me, it must be the foreground. The architecture should never dominate. It should be no more than a setting, creating a mood, a happy frame of mind." Is there a conflict between architect and director? "Perhaps. But I know of no compromise. It's the director's building."

"There is a very real conflict between the architect and the museum," d'Harnoncourt asserts. "The architect must soft-pedal himself as an artist. It is hard for him, because he thinks of the building as his work of art. Designing an incinerator would be easier; he then would bring beauty to a utilitarian structure. In the museum, he is competing. It is easier for him to yield to functional requirements than to esthetics." As to the importance of architecture for museums: "I don't even think it's a particularly interesting subject."

What do the architects reply? "The museum has become a civic necessity, a shrine for the people," says Philip Johnson. "This is a building that must be considered as important as churches or city halls in our civic schemes."

Concerning the extent of the director's control, he asks, "How much ought you to force your idiosyncratic hanging methods on the conception of the architect? You could do it, I suppose, to the point of achieving a well-functioning, but dull and stupid building. The museum must be beautiful, and its monumental aspect is the true province of the architect.

"Civilizations," Johnson adds, "are sometimes remembered only by their buildings."

Edward Stone, architect of the American Embassy at New Delhi and of the American Pavilion at the Brussels Fair, offers a point of view at odds with those of both designers and directors. Limiting his remarks on the desirability of creating a monument to a suggestive, "I am not without ego," he argues for a setting that would afford relaxed, casual enjoyment, "as if we were living comfortably and unself-consciously with works of art."

IN an argument as appealing as it is dubious, Stone contends that since painting and sculpture were originally collected in a private, domestic atmosphere (the domesticity of palaces may be somewhat questionable), the museum should project an informal air.

"Why create a synthetic, laboratory environment with brilliantly lighted, austere surroundings?" he asks. "The museum should be like a club or residence, with carpeting, comfortable chairs, wood-and-fabric walls, smoking and refreshments."

Nearly forgotten in the controversy is the artist. Like the

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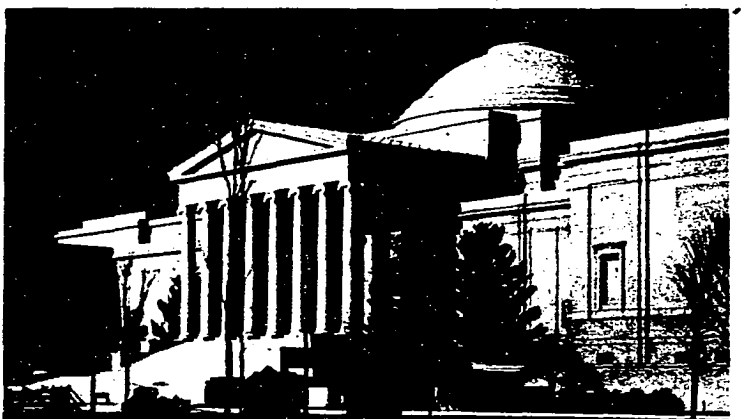
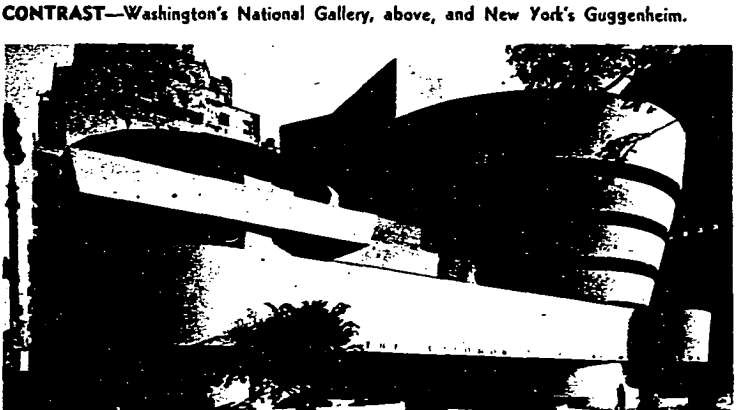
MASSED ART—A detail from a painting by Giovanni Pannini, "Renaissance Rome," epitomizes a once popular method of displaying art. Michelangelo's "Moses" is portrayed in the center.



CONTRAST—Washington's National Gallery, above, and New York's Guggenheim.



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director, he favors a structure that serves rather than dominates its contents. Constantino Nivola, a sculptor well represented in contemporary collections, says, "Art doesn't need much—a good light, and space around it. But there is no reason why the building can't be a good one."

Ideally, the museum should be a fusion of art and architecture: the respectful and sympathetic installation of the art object balanced with a setting of comparable quality. The building should be handsome enough to be a recognizable landmark, important and interesting enough to attract visitors; a museum without people is no museum at all.

Is this ideal museum an unattainable dream? The answer appears to lie in the reining of the architect's ego. At present, he too often is more concerned with producing an independent artistic monument than a suitable background for art. And, in this age of intense professional competition, he is not averse to the profitable personal publicity that a striking or debatable structure will bring him. He has lost sight of the fact that the museum, by its very nature, requires a subtle, understated kind of design.

Although he provides the setting—space, light, color, scale, effects of intimacy or grandeur—he plays only a supporting role. He must play it with distinction, but he must never forget that the collection is the star.

Ironically, a return to some of the principles of the conventional museum may be indicated. Like permissive child-rearing, the amorphous open plan may be on the way out. The traditional scheme, with its focal court surrounded by fixed galleries, its spaciousness, simplicity and lack of personal architectural idiosyncrasies, suggests advantages that have been ignored or lost in current examples.

The National Gallery in Washington, for all the coldness and conventionality of its architectural details and the depressing sterility of its facade, offers impressive space and a well-organized setting for its superb collection. The welcome greenery of its courts creates restful oases and orientation points for the galleries.

Although Philip Johnson is known as a dedicated champion of the new architecture, he speaks admiringly of the "clear, concise space arrangements" of Sir John Sloane's Dulwich Picture Gallery near London, of Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Altes Museum in Berlin and Franz Karl Leo von Klenze's Alte Pinakothek in Munich, all nineteenth-century structures. Most of Johnson's latest projects are court-oriented buildings that look back toward these older models. They emphasize a spacious elegance and a delicate refinement of detail that may do less damage to their contents than more aggressively individualistic work.

The architect and planner José Luis Sert has proposed a scheme for a Mediterranean locale in which galleries would be self-contained one-room buildings, united by outdoor courts and gardens. The trend is again toward a fixed plan and permanent, generously dimensioned galleries, reinterpreted in terms of contemporary materials and esthetics and needs.

The true test of a museum is the impact of its contents on the heart and mind, and the sense of beauty or gratification enjoyed by the visitor as a private, personal experience. Whether the new buildings will improve this experience remains to be seen.