Art: The Whitney Museum Shows What It Can Do...In the Right Building

By JOHN CANADAY

THEY say that we should be strong enough not to be too much affected by the sheer physical presence of our surroundings, that we should rise above such base considerations and that we can do so if we are sufficiently developed in the Spiritual Department. This is a lot of nonsense. Or at least it has been a lot of nonsense in the case of the Whitney Museum of American Art since 1954. In that year the Whitney, potentially the most vital force in its field, entered a period of decline comparable to that of an aging invalid incarcerated in a stuffy chamber, when it established itself in that dreary building (for which a friend coins the word "dimsmal") on West 54th St., the one that it recently managed to fob off on the Museum of Modern Art.

The Whitney's troubles have not been entirely explicable by its unfortunately designed habitat. There has always been the matter of money—a matter that is not yet altogether solved. But there has always been the feeling that no matter how well the Whitney was operated in other departments, including the Imagination Department, where it has not always performed with brilliance, it was hampered, held back, and in fact hopeless from the start, since anything it exhibited was immediately drained of life by the surroundings.

The old Whitney building was not even a building so aggressively bad that—like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and others of its kind—it could become a positive force, admirable in its own sphere and a worthy opponent with whom one could take pleasure in doing battle. The old Whitney building was just a dead weight, a suffocation.

But it was, at the same time, a wonderful out. Not that the staff ever gave signs of regarding it as an out, as an excuse for the Whitney's fairly consistent failure to get anywhere. Possibly some members of the staff, unbalanced by 12 years in the place, even shed a tear upon leaving it. But nevertheless it was an out, since a critic was always tempted to be kind to a Whitney show for the same reasons that one might cheer a one-legged man in a cross-country race. He didn't stand a chance of winning, but it was damned game of him even to enter.

Early Fears

For a few dreadful months, the rising structure of the new building suggested that the worst faults of the old one—cramped space and an oppressive sense of inflexible enclosure—were being repeated on a more elaborate scale. There was a feeling that the poor old Whitney just couldn't win. But it has won brilliantly with a building that works beautifully as exhibition space, and, furthermore, has installed an opening exhibition, "Art of the United States: 1670-1966," of such excellence that no excuses need be made for it.

As a survey of American painting (with less attention to sculpture), this show is not complete in an academic sense, since many a key painting is omitted. But it is complete in a much more important way: it manages to tell what has gone on over a period of 300 years in this country without adopting any arbitrary line of development—that is, the examples are not selected, as certain other museums might have selected them, to prove that everything led to the ineffable climax of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, nor are they selected, as they could have been, to prove that certain social and moral virtues supposedly peculiar to this country have been consistently reflected in its art. They have been selected to give an assimilable cross-section of the best American art—"best" as a combination of typical and esthetically most rewarding—whether the individual example is a familiar textbook item, an unexpected beauty by a little-noticed painter, or even an anonymous work. It is a selection that combines scholarship and imagination without the preciousness that can infect either when a museum is out to assemble a show that must be noticed and written about.

All's Well

In its terminal section, where we come to the immediately current vogues, there is an uncomfortable feeling that these vast canvases are not paying their way on the expensive new walls they occupy, that they are parasites upon the building. But there is nothing wrong with the Whitney's selection that is not wrong with American art at the moment. What is indicated is that the Whitney's recent policy of concentrating on art of the moment, or of the very recent past, has been a mistake.

But the Whitney has beaten any objectors to the draw with its announced decision to return to its original policy of collecting and exhibiting American art of all periods. The opening show proves how well they can do this, and the decision comes at just the right moment, when we are entering a season with anxious dealers, a novelty-satiated public and newly wary collectors questioning the validity of an art that changes its form from season to season, almost from month to month.

The most encouraging thing about the Whitney's rebirth is that it might become, truly, the Museum of American Art that it is called, rather than the Museum of New York Art that it has become. Everything is working just right for the Whitney just now. On the day of its opening last week, it could announce a grant from the Ford Foundation to finance exploratory trips across the country for the discovery of talents that have not attracted the sharp-eyed dealer in search of saleable merchandise. The Whitney Annual, a year from now, might turn into something more than the dealers' fair that it has to be when the museum is limited to Madison Avenue for its foraging.

The Whitney no longer has an out, and by the evidence of its current show, doesn't need one. High, high hopes.

Thomas Eakins's "Miss Van Buren," an American masterpiece at the Whitney Museum.
"... with scholarship and imagination"

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AT the moment, the most disliked building in New York is undoubtedly the Whitney Museum. It seems that almost everyone's feelings have been violated by this brashly unconventional structure on the suave upper reaches of Madison Avenue. Still, it fascinates. One of its most serious pre-opening security problems was keeping the curious out, and on Tuesday evening the interior and its contents, at least, were endorsed enthusiastically by a crushingly chic crowd of first-nighters. Like that fine old saying about sin, first the Whitney repulses; then it intrigues; and finally, it is embraced.

This reviewer embraced it in print on September 8. It is understood that this is not the only way to build a museum, even on that awkwardly small, corner plot. But it is an excellent way, and there can be no quarrel with an unusual design that is justified by imaginative, but practical planning, in which the primary requirement of maximum exhibition space is beautifully ordered and separated from efficiently organized services.

Smashing Setting

This is what the architect, Marcel Breuer, and his associate, Hamilton Smith, have done by the use of the building's controversial, inverted setbacks, which permit, on that scanty site, a sunken sculpture court and an extra glass-walled story below grade, with exhibition floors increasing dramatically in height and dimension as they rise. The top gallery, 17 feet high and the full 125-foot depth of the land, with its single Martian eye, is subdivided for the present show, but open, it could provide one of the most smashingly suitable settings for large-scale contemporary sculpture in the city.

"You start with the client's program," Mr. Breuer observes. "That's not architecture, but it's the groundwork. Architecture grows out of it."

Unfortunately, it does not just grow. Architecture is the painstaking clarification and organization of that functional program into a distinctive and esthetically viable physical form. This is exactly what most buildings that line the streets of New York, including some with major pretensions, are not. Nor does it work the other way round—pick a striking form and push in the functions — although this is becoming increasingly common practice, or malpractice, today.

Brutal Beauty

Good architecture is still the difficult, conscientious, creative, expressive planning for that elusive synthesis that is a near-contradiction in terms: efficiency and beauty. And beauty, as at the Whitney, is not always in the eye of the beholder. We still cling tenaciously to that timelessly appealing, fallacious definition of the Greeks; the beautiful is good, and the good is beautiful. The good, and the beautiful today are often harsh, strong, severe and bold (the new brutalism, in architectural language), although —and this is the kicker— there is the same underlying care, taste and sensitivity in the adjustment of elements as in the most refined, traditional practice of art. If there are any basic ground rules for architecture-watchers, they should be, first, don't look for something pretty; and second, look again.

The materials of the Whitney are magnificent, and they have been used with a sure

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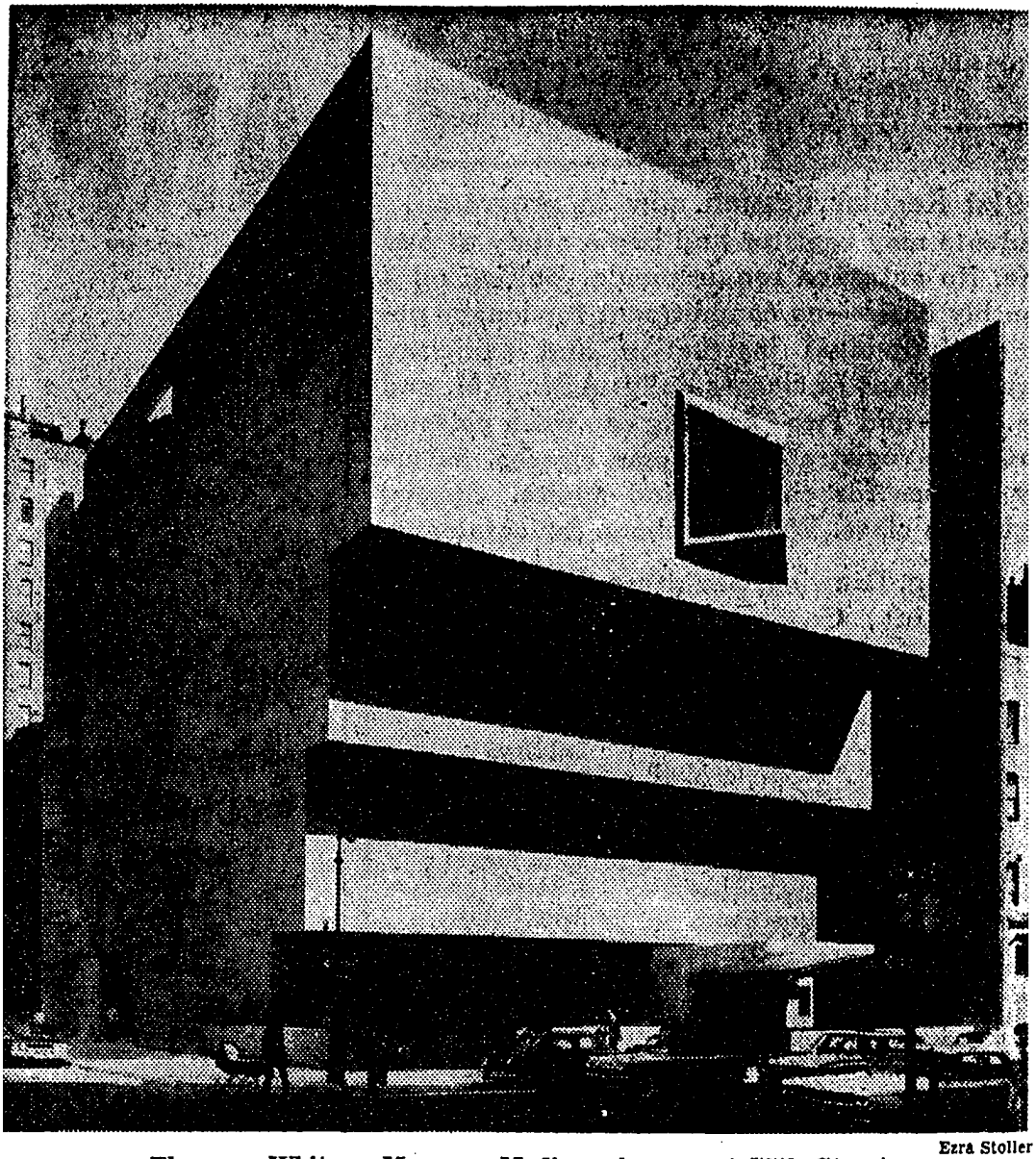

Ezra Stoller

The new Whitney Museum, Madison Avenue at 75th Street

"A distinctive, recognizable structure on the New York scene"

In the Right Building

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hand. The flame-treated gray granite employed outside and in, unpolished and polished, is one of the handsomest stones to be seen in New York. The unfinished concrete used with it for the sculptural element of the entrance bridge, the service wing at the south, and the enclosing end walls, have programmatic and esthetic justification. Concrete aggregate walls and teak and bronze fittings inside, all meticulously crafted, are deliberately understated luxury, detailed with exemplary finesse.

The Whitney offers several architectural lessons. In addition to its virtues of thoughtful planning and sensitive artistry in the use of materials, it is an effective demonstration of the fact that the anonymous, flexible exhibition space most directors want need not be reduced to the lowest barn, warehouse, or factory common denominator. Inevitably, museum space has a sameness, partitioned and lit with uniform technological care, totally dependent on the quality of its displays.

But with all of the Whitney's flexibility and mechanical marvels, a sense of architecture remains. Breuer's open space is defined by the character of its hung, concrete grid ceilings, bluestone, slate and teak floors, the design of permanent features, such as elevator walls and stairwells, and those odd, trapezoidal windows that offer occasional exotically-framed glimpses of the ordinary world.

He never smothers with the conventional trappings of pseudo-glamor, and he offers convincing evidence that new buildings need not be routinely finished inside with the sleekly monotonous, expensive packaged excellence of the contemporary corporate cliché. The style here is suave-brutal; a curiously anachronistic esthetic that stimulates, provokes and unsettles, and produces some of today's best new buildings. But once its displays have been installed, this interesting structure in its own right becomes, simply, a museum.

In addition to a museum, the Whitney wanted, and got, a landmark; a distinctive, recognizable structure on the New York scene. Yet it has not achieved this status at the expense of its pleasantly elegant, if architecturally undistinguished surroundings.

One of the Whitney's more significant lessons, this time in urban design, is that the new and different is not necessarily destructive, and the timid and traditional does not necessarily preserve and protect. Done badly, one can be as vicious an environmental violation as the other. The answer is completely in the spirit and quality of the architecture.

New Yorkers, conditioned by the Guggenheim, will probably accept the Whitney fairly quickly. In doing so, it is to be hoped that they will recognize that the Guggenheim is an *objet d'art*, inside and out, with its staff battling endlessly to make it a workable museum, while the Whitney is a workable museum raised to the level of architectural art. It will be a constant challenge to its directors to match the uncompromising standards, sophisticated expertise and thoroughly professional excellence of the building.