ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Pei's Elegant Addition to Boston's Arts Museum

BOSTON

What do you do after you've designed the East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington? If you are the architect I.M. Pei, you design the West Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, adding one more museum to the distinguished list completed by the firm in recent years. Boston's West Wing will open to the public on July 22, after a week of ceremonies, festivities and previews that start next Thursday. The $22-million, three-story wing provides 80,000 square feet of dramatic new space and is the product of a crash, three-year construction program. It is part of a five-year master plan being carried out under the guidance of the museum's director, Jan Fontein, and associate director, Ross W. Farrar, that is rearranging collections, renovating facilities and providing new galleries and public spaces for the 111-year-old arts institution.

The East Wing of Washington's National Gallery, with its no-holds-or-costs-barred approach to magnificence in the modern manner, is a hard act to follow. Boston's new building completes the formal, sedate, 1909 monument designed by Guy Lowell, one of the better examples of the Beaux Arts monuments that defined the art and cultural ambitions of American cities at the turn of the century. That, too, is a hard act to follow.

The East Wing brought Washington the integrated experience of modern art and architecture, establishing the fact of the 20th century's esthetic and structural achievements in the nation's capital. It also established the fact of today's museum as a spatial and pedestrian phenomenon at the social and spectator level, rather than just as a place to see art. That bothers some people, who feel that display and viewing have become subordinated to circulation in something resembling the atrium of a shopping mall. They will probably feel the same way about Boston. They are not all wrong, of course, but what they fail to note is the logical and not unreasonable connection between the consumerism of culture and commerce.

Actually, they miss the point. Those who have campaigned to make art accessible and agreeable to everyone have ignored the most obvious and legitimate way that this is actually occurring. It is in these handsome spaces of which art of the same esthetic impulse is a real and integral part that the message has its greatest impact. What matters is the level and quality of the experience provided, and the way in which it is controlled by the architect and the museum staff to determine its meaning and value. This unity of art and environment is basic to the art of our time.

It is the rare visitor to the National Gallery's East Wing who does not carry away a different, and enlarged vision of art in this century, or who does not at least sense that some kind of total esthetic has been offered beyond the special exhibition the viewer may have come to see.

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I first sensed this a number of years ago in Pei's Everson Museum in Syracuse, N.Y., where it was possible to feel that one was part of a kind of art that included the building, the Morris Louis on the wall and the view of trees through a strategically placed window, all orchestrated by space and light and a contemporary sensibility. This is also true in Boston, although the program and needs are quite different from either Washington or Syracuse. But these new museums tell us an equal amount about the ideas that are shaping both museums and architecture today.

The Boston building offers a full measure of elegance, dignity and delight. A beautiful, light, white space, approximately 225 feet long, is topped by a soaring, glass barrel vault 52 feet high through which changing daylight streams; the word galleria has been abused and misused, but this is the real thing. This spectacular, three-story high interior forms a circulation spine between new exhibition galleries and a bookstore, restaurant and cafeteria, with classrooms and auditorium on the lowest level and offices at the top. The walls are a surprising combination of lacquered white panels on one side and smoothly crafted concrete on the other. It is the suaveness of both finishes that unites them, while creating surface interest for the long, narrow passage.

Michael Lutch

The West Wing of the Museum of Fine Arts—"The building celebrates the new museum-going; it is predicated on the social pleasure and communal experience of being there."

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Part of the new space was quite literally carved out of an earlier addition, which was stripped of its facade and incorporated into the plan. Given a new glass wall, this section now houses the bookstore and restaurant that are visible from the central corridor, and which also open one side of the galleria. The problem of matching new and old columns has been stylishly resolved. A delicate aluminum frame makes a subscreen for the vaulted glass roof. The wing offers direct, axial connections to the old building, with views to the rotunda and glimpses of the park outside. New and old sections merge without confusion or jarring transitions. And daylight is triumphantly present everywhere, in the galleries and public spaces; a return of natural light to museums after years of darkness that should be a cause for universal rejoicing. The look is restrained, pristine high tech, tempered by Pei's familiar, superbly finished, boardmarked concrete.

It is impossible to read this interesting interior from the outside. The barrel vault projects slightly above the roof line of a virtually unrelieved horizontal box broken only by glass openings held flat and flush with the surface. This nice, but dull exterior, perfectly and painstakingly detailed in the same Maine granite used for the original structure, is both bland and unrevealing. That is unfortunate, because the new facade will become the main entrance, adjacent to parking. Guy Lowell's Huntington Avenue facade still wins, hands down, because it is so rich in what might be called the "received" assets of tradition. Columns, stairs, cornices and moldings and all of the details, paraphernalia and conventions of the Beaux Arts vocabulary automatically assure scale, proportion and contrast. These are the freebies of the classical style.

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But the new wing has a particular interest, beyond its obvious purpose of adding space and freeing the collection for reassessment and rearrangement. Its design virtually defines the museum's changing role and offers an exemplary solution to the growing problem of active versus passive pleasure, of experiencing art in crowds or through quiet contemplation. This building focuses on other than art-viewing functions, and organizes them all in one structure. Places to eat and socialize, an enlarged bookstore and sales shop, the museum's education department, seminar and lecture facilities — all the

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I. M. Pei in Boston

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things that serve group activities are located here. And so are the special galleries, with their daylit, coffered skylights, which will accommodate those record-breaking, crowd-pleasing, transient supershows that seem to have become a way of museum life.

This building celebrates the new museum-going; it emphasizes circulation and shared activity; it is predicated on the social pleasure and communal experience of being there. And by collecting all this in one place, it becomes possible to return the rest of the museum to its fundamental purpose: scholarship and the private, contemplative communication that is the essential response to great art. This basic function of the museum has been all but destroyed in escalating head counts.

The purpose is underscored by the clear intention to serve an even larger number of visitors, on a more generous schedule, than has previously been possible. Both the plan and the program have grown out of the need and desire to offer expanded service to the public. The new wing is designed so that it can be open when the rest of the museum is closed; the entire museum is now open one night a week, but the West Wing will be open a total of three nights. The proper assessment of this social and cultural role, the recognition of what the public wants and the best way to provide it, have figured prominently in the museum's planning.

But there is also a shrewd awareness of how to capitalize on this programming as a financial resource. The West Wing will surely be one of Boston's most attractive and inviting places to go. The small, round marble tables under the large ficus trees in the galleria, with views of some of the museum's more spectacular works of art, will undoubtedly create a permanent traffic jam — but that is hardly a serious matter.

Pei's High Modern Style, evident here and in the National Gallery, is considered by many of the younger generation to be somewhat old hat. But what few seem to be noticing, probably because it is being done so discreetly, conservatively and skillfully, is that these buildings have been moving into some of the areas that have been staked out by post-modernism. It is a matter of tone; the same thing can be done with or without shock value or personal eccentricities.

Architecture today has advanced beyond the simple, open plan, or direct progression from one space to another. The new buildings have more in common with those marvelous 16th- and 17th-century drawings of stage sets where stairs and ramps give onto platforms and balconies glimpsed through arches and balustrades, for spaces seen and experienced at the same time. There is a carefully choreographed arrangement of related levels and vistas. Movement is an essential component. The intricate relationships are both real and implied, and their definition by light and geometry is as important as their perception through structure and space. In more radical work, like that of Richard Meier, these effects become the building's organizing principle, but they are also present in more conservative structures like Boston's West Wing. This kind of architectural event is a significant part of the total esthetic the new museum offers. In fact, it is where art and architecture are going — together. ■

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