Harsh and Handsome

The New Whitney Is Superbly Suited For an Art That Thrives on Isolation

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

With three times the gallery space and 10 times the chic of its old building, the new, $6-million Whitney Museum promises to become this year's fashionable focus, or Whitney-a Go-Go, of the jet art set. The new Whitney is a harshly handsome building. It also contains many sophisticated subtleties of design and detail. But the taste for its disconcertingly top-heavy, inverted pyramidal mass grows on one slowly, like a taste for olives or warm beer. It has a constant complement of sidewalk critics.

An Appraisal

At first, second and third glance, the building suggests a a mannered tour de force in the current mode of architecture for sculpture's sake.

Stark and Unsettling

On fourth, fifth and further inspections, matching interior to exterior, it reveals itself as a carefully calculated design that squeezes the most out of a small awkward 104-by-125-foot corner lot with maximum artistry and almost hypnotic skill. Tightly planned and organized, services are removed from the exhibition areas for 30,000 square feet of display space. space.

This structural and planning legerdemain is the work of Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith, working closely with the museum staff. Mr. Breuer is the internationally famous Hungarian-born architect who helped bring the modern style from Europe to America in the nineteen-thirties.

Although notable Breuer structures include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization building in Paris, done with Bernard Zehrfuss and Pier Luigi Nervi; the United States Office Building at The Hague, the Netherlands and a distinguished assortment of schools, churches and houses in this country, he has been largely an architect's architect. His headquarters for the Department of Housing and Urban Development is under way in Washington, and he recently received the commission for the controversial Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial.

Not a Single Cliché

This is his first museum, and except for a few arbitrary, vaguely trapezoidal windows that come equipped with a full battery of irrelevant functional rationalizatios, it functional rationalizations, it

The virtually windowless structure gains gallery space through its cantilevered upper floors, and digs into the ground for a glass-walled floor below grade that opens onto a sunken sculpture court. Viewed from the street, the court has a suggestion of the jailyard, not entirely dispelled by the stony severity inside or the gum wrappers dropped from the entrance bridge that crosses it. But gum wrappers are pop art, and the view from below is impressive.

Mr. Breuer's stark and sometimes unsettling structure may be less than pretty, but it has notable dignity and presence, two qualities not found uniformly in today's art. It will lend these qualities to its contents, by extension and by am-

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bience. Occasionally, it wins hands down as a work of art itself, as when it puts sculpture to shame in the use of materials, light and forms in a striking stairwell.

The building has an extraordinary urbanity, which masquerades as a kind of "back-to-structure" crudeness. This "brutalism," as it is called in the trade, is one of the more exotic and popular forms of today's architectural estheticism.

It stresses masses of stone, largely unpolished—in this case a truly beautiful gray granite outside and in—raw concrete complete with board marks of forms, rugged, bush-hammered concrete aggregate for interior walls, bluestone and split-slate floors.

The trick—and again the hand is quicker than the eye—is the subtly scooped curve of a stone stair riser, the shape of a teak rail, or the juxtaposition of a rough-surfaced concrete wall with the extravagant luxury of massive, silky bronze doors. The "close-to-earth" materials have all the peasant simplicity of Marie Antoinette playing farmgirl in the hamlet at Versailles.

Add to the sophistication of this deceptive and esoteric austerity the most sophisticated technology, and the building is a total 20th-century phenomenon: a superb artificial environment for an art that maintains it is part of its time, but thrives best in hothouse isolation. The Whitney is a splendid hothouse.

The mechanical features include drive-in art delivery, sliding storage racks, "instant" walls and push-button coat checking. Hung, grid ceilings reduce lighting and space division to sleek, standardized simplicity for those inevitable exhibition rat-mazes that are a curator's delight. (One of the most magnificent spaces in the city right now is the still unpartitioned fifth-floor gallery, 17-feet high and 125-feet long.)

The exhibits are now being installed, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish art from artifact. There is a curious mixture of crushed automobile fenders (sculpture), objets trouvés (art), and electric tools and equipment (construction). It is rumored that a shovel stood by a wall for a week until its status was settled.

In a sense, however, the building is its own exhibit. But unlike the Guggenheim, it is not the whole show. The new Whitney uses the strict, understated fulfillment of a functional program as the basis for a serious and successful work of architecture.