ARCHITECTURE VIEW: BOSTON'S MUSEUM IN THE MARKET ARCHITECTURE VIEW BOSTON'S MUSEUM AT
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ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Boston's Museum in the Market

The outpost that the Boston Museum of Fine Arts opened in the Faneuil Hall Marketplace last June is now in its fifth month of operation, and the museum is soon to install its second show. This means that almost one-quarter of the two-year period has passed during which the museum is scheduled to occupy the top floor of the South Market Building in that fabulously successful recycled Boston landmark, a space that has been generously donated, rent-free, by the Rouse Company of Maryland, the developer of the Marketplace. After the two-year period, the museum's future is in the lap of the real estate business.

The first show, called "Faces of Five Thousand Years," has been a spectacular triumph. It is full of history and gentle charm, masterworks and curiousities, spanning everything from superb portraits to the decorative arts. Installed under the direction of Kenneth Moffett, the museum's Curator of 20th-Century Art, its objects have come from a vast array of departmental treasures. Free-ranging and utterly enchanting, the display covers the depiction of the human face in many aspects, media and periods, and it obviously includes a high percentage of curatorial favorites.

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The second show, which will open next month (that gives you time to see the first show, if you haven't already), to run through the holiday season, will be called "On Angels' Wings." This exhibition, drawing on religious and mythological sources and many cultures, will also represent the full array of the museum's departments. It is possible to predict another presentation of surprises, high standards, and conspicuous delight.

If the Marketplace Museum — more correctly called the Museum of Fine Arts at Faneuil Hall — sounds wonderful, it is. The only thing wrong about it is that two-year limitation. If this undertaking has proved anything in five months — and it has proved quite a lot — it is that the Museum should be a permanent part of the incredibly successful commercial complex that has been developed in the old Quincy Market buildings behind Faneuil Hall. It is a marvelously enriching element of the city's Government Center master plan and the spectacular rebirth of downtown Boston. Quite clearly, the Museum belongs there. A welcome addition to the lively retail mix, it provides an important extra dimension of quality and character to the whole enterprise.

But there are lessons to be learned beyond the obvious ones of diversity and pleasure. It is not just that there are virtues in a cultural change-of-pace and a contemplative oasis in an unrelieved commercial atmosphere. The success of the undertaking proves a few things about museums and audiences that were only hunches in the heads and hearts of people like Howard W. Johnson, president of the museum, Jan Fontein, its director, and Clementine Brown, its delightful and dynamic director of information and the scheme's chief promoter. These ideas imply that some basic rethinking of the objectives and operations of art museums may be overdue.

What the Boston Museum did, with the blessings of the Rouse Company, was to take 12,000 square feet of the top floor of the South Market Building and turn the space into a set of simple and attractive galleries. The museum's designers, Tom Wong and Judith Downes, were as concerned with the building's historic character as they were with the nature and installation of the exhibits. The North and South Market Buildings are two long structures of brick and granite flanking the central, domed Quincy Market, all designed by Alexander Parris in the 1820's, in that most useful and dignified style known as the Greek Revival. The three buildings have been restored on the outside and stripped to brick

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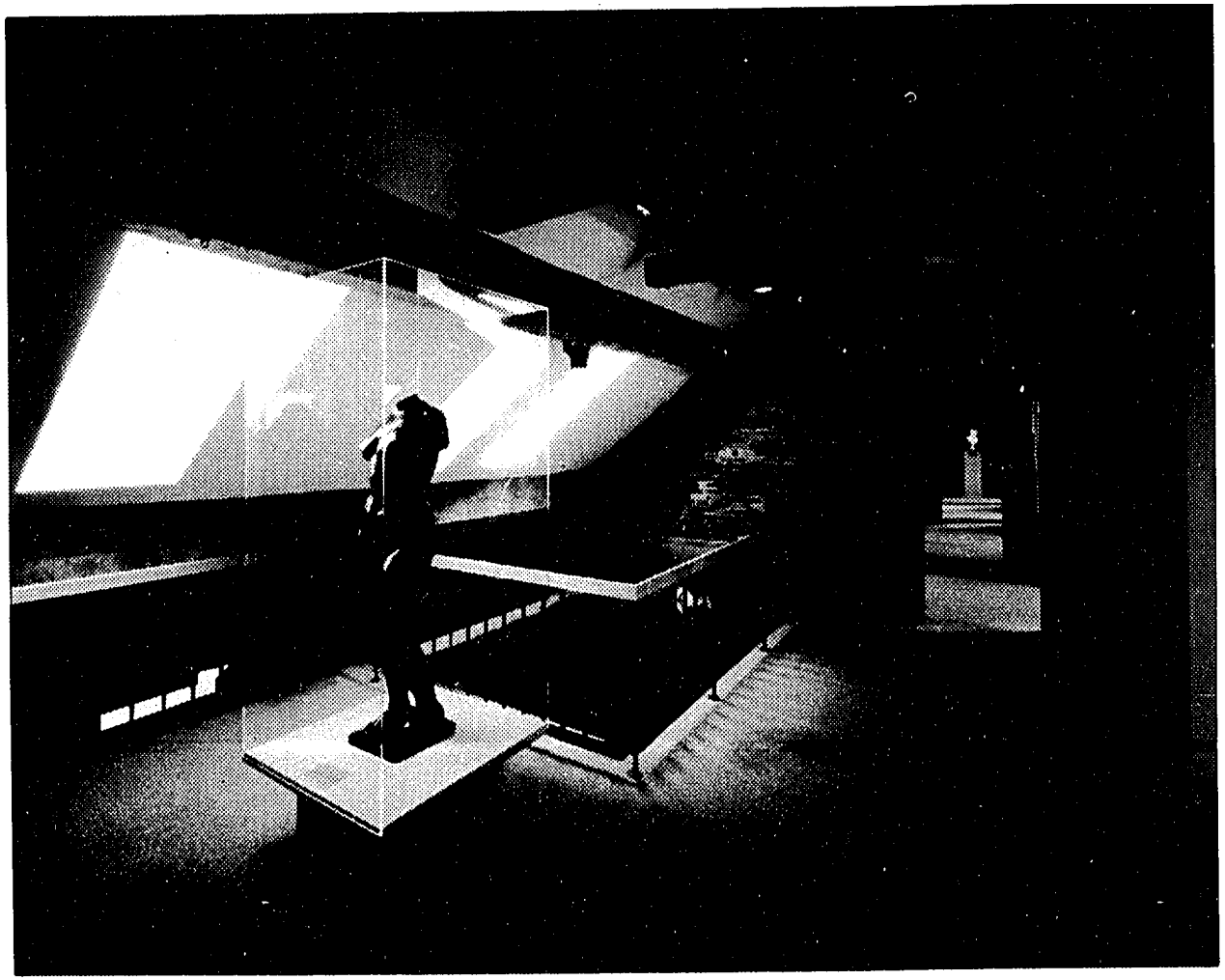

Marketplace Museum—"A historic building treated with respect and affection."

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and beams on the inside, with mechanical systems and space divisions provided for commercial tenants. These spaces have been commanding record rentals as shops, restaurants, and offices.

To make the interior suitable for the museum, partitions were removed, exhibition lighting was installed, the air-conditioning system was revised for the requirements of works of art, a super-sprinkler system was added, and windows and skylights were wired for maximum security. Extra precautions were taken to cover and protect the displays, since curators were understandably jittery about so popular a place and the unknown character of the crowds.

But the historic building was treated with respect and affection. The old, hand-made brick of the walls, with its unexpected corbelled details, the huge wooden beams, the daylight streaming in the windows and skylights, were capitalized on rather than neutralized or blanked out. The building's domestic scale, in particular, was treated as an asset. The result of this sympathetic approach is an impressively effective setting for such themes as "The Faces of Power," and "The Faces of Beauty," and everything from funeral masks to Renaissance portraits. The domestic scale, in fact, seems to give a special kind of impact to the art and artifacts; the viewer becomes effortlessly and intimately involved with them. And the nature of the place becomes inextricably entwined with the esthetic experience.

The lesson here is the importance of context. The best-loved museums are usually those with a strong character of their own, elegant, eccentric, personal, affording some kind of unusual, special setting. When art is tied to a unique ambience, the art itself seems to become more memorable, and even to gain in its dimensions. It is enjoyed to a degree seldom achieved in the settings of magnificent neutrality favored by most museums. Esthetic pleasure is a complex thing.

In the five months that the Marketplace Museum has been open, attendance records have been set that deserve analysis. Remember, this is no walk-in-off-the-street experience. The visitor must find the entrance on South Market Street, which is marked by an extremely discreet kiosk, and then take an elevator up to the top floor. It was normal to assume that there would be a good audience in so central and populous a place. No one thought the exhibition would languish. But no one expected the magnitude of the response it has received.

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Attendance since the beginning of June, not counting school groups and the handicapped, has been recorded at 130,765 visitors. Compare this with the museum's total attendance for the previous year in the large Huntington Avenue building, a period which included the Pompeian and Irish Treasures spectaculars, of 800,000 people. In the first month of operation, the Market branch was getting 43 percent of the daily attendance of the whole museum operation, a figure that went up quickly to surpass the number at the main building. It has even held its own with the museum's big fall event, the Chardin show. The heaviest day at the Market saw 2,600 people, and the heaviest week drew 11,000. And most of these people said that they had never been to the main museum at all, and some had never been to any museum before. That, surely, is something to think about.

'The Market museum has shown how art can enrich the commercial equation.'

No one seems to be intimidated or awed by this museum experience. Nor is there any abuse of the facilities. Visitors' written comments express pleasure and gratitude. Five guards seem to be able to handle an average of 1,200 visitors a day and security has been no problem. There have been no extravagantly expensive installations. The museum has used grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and other sources to help meet operating costs.

The hunch at the museum was that a lot of people would really like accessible art, and that they would come to see it without expensive educational programs, publications, or ancillary activities. That, of course, is an almost shocking kind of revisionist theory at a time when hard-pressed museums are increasingly resorting to immensely costly, sumptuous supershows, knock-em-dead gimmicks and extravagant promotion to enlarge audiences and income. The people in Boston simply thought there were easier and more valid ways to draw a broad and responsive audience. They even thought about what museums were supposed to be, whom they were supposed to reach, and how the job could be done in the most rewarding and rational way.

The Market branch has had a response far beyond expectations. It has dispelled fears of security and expense involved in a decentralized operation. It has demonstrated how art can enrich, and even increase the values of, the commercial equation. People are being brought together in an esthetic and environmental experience applicable to all cities, and with particularly pointed reference to downtown landmarks. Art is becoming a part of daily life. Back in the mists of social history, less than 100 years ago, wasn't that what museums were supposed to do? ■

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