A CAPITAL ART PALACE: GEOMETRY WITH DRAMA HUXTABLE

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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A CAPITAL ART PALACE

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Under development for 10 years, the National Gallery's East Building opens on June 1 and it was worth the wait. Not only is it a triangular triumph architecturally, but it is a museum that exalts — not just exhibits — art. Times critics Ada Louise Huxtable and Hilton Kramer evaluate this new addition to Washington's Mall.

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GEOMETRY WITH DRAMA

By Ada Louise Huxtable

The suspense is over for those who have watched the slow growth of the latest marble monolith on the Washington Mall; with the opening of its new East Building on June 1, the National Gallery will have moved into the 20th century in a major, magnificent way. After 10 years of design and construction, during which the structure's soaring slabs and princely price were attacked with predictable regularity, the result is a powerful, palatial statement of the creative accommodation of contemporary art and architecture.

If there is any controversy about this building it will probably center on contrasts between its cool, formal elegance and the bold engineering esthetic and cultural-circus atmosphere of Paris's Centre Pompidou. Pompidou, or Beaubourg, as it is more popularly known, and the National Gallery expansion are both new, large, striking, modern museums in national capitals, but the similarity ends there. Any comparisons are instantly crushed by the sheer weight and scale of Washington's monolithic classicism, against which all of the city's major construction must be measured.

What Washington needed is what Washington got: a genuine contemporary classic from the demonstrated talents of the architectural firm of I.M. Pei & Partners, something that did not die on the Mall at birth. It has taken most of this century to get an uncompromised modern monument into Washington at all.

This is the right building in the right place. Mr. Pei has delivered a structure in which the art of architecture unites with the painting and sculpture of its own time for a symbiotic relationship of singular grandeur. The unyielding symmetry and inert masses of the Mall are no arena for the current battles of modernism and post-modernism; this is not the spot for the *dernier* architectural *cri*. Above all, it is a location, in the center of the national eye and consciousness, that has been crying for excellence.

Traditionally, the capital has resisted the active present or the creative act. A somnolent status quo with a generous softening of trees, the charm of a lengthy spring that is one of the more glorious, flowering wonders of the world, accounts for much of Washing-

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ton's appeal. But the city has also resisted American leadership and vitality in the visual and building arts. Its impressive array of marvelous museums is not without collections of fine modern work. Still, its architecture has ranged from beaux arts platitudes to failed contemporary gestures. And in one building after another, the avowed aim of uniting the classical spirit and the contemporary style has bombed.

What the National Gallery has finally done, under the leadership of its director, J. Carter Brown, and with the generous sponsorship of Paul Mellon—the building is the gift of Mr. Mellon, the late Ailsa Mellon Bruce and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation—is to embrace the mid-20th-century American esthetic achievement and its international framework as part of a spectacular showplace. Nothing that money, knowledge, concern and unsparing attention to detail can provide has been neglected. This is a magnificent gesture to equal Andrew Mellon's gift to the nation of the original National Gallery, that confident Roman temple of 1941 by John Russell Pope which the new structure flanks to the east.

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The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts will house a library and study rooms for art scholars.

The two are at home together, without the usual Washington hypocrisies, in which new buildings fall on their faces trying to imitate the old in proportions and details. The East Building parallels the original building, covering eight acres from Fourth to Third Streets, between Pennsylvania Avenue and the Mall. The old and new structures, with 37 years and a revolution in architecture between them, share the same Tennessee pink marble, heroic scale and imperial dignity. The Pope building, with its colonnaded porticoes, symmetrical wings and shallow saucer dome, its restrained, correct ornament and overwhelming scale, is an archetypical exercise in academic neo-classicism.

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The Pei building is all triangular shapes and knife-sharp angles in its matching marble skin. It draws these shapes, not from some arbitrary notion of originality, but from its odd, trapezoidal site, where Pennsylvania Avenue and Madison Drive converge on the Capitol. Like the solution of a giant puzzle, the building's design fits and joins those shapes and angles for a symmetry of its own that relates to the symmetry of the older structure. But its drama—outside at least—is equally restrained.

Inside, that drama expands. The building consists of two connected triangles of somewhat different size and shape, made by the diagonal division of the trapezoidal site. The larger triangle accommodates the museum, and the slightly smaller one is the National Gallery's newly inaugurated Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts. When this section, with its research facilities and library with six-story reading room and window-walls on the Mall, opens next year, it will be as important for art scholarship as the museum wing is for the national collections.

The most dramatic architectural element is the connection between the two sections: a soaring, triangular skylighted court that rises to 80 feet at its highest point. The court is topped by a glazed space-frame spanning 16,000 square feet, or more than a third of an acre—an engineering tour de force of glass and steel tetrahedrons that is an incredible feat of fabrication. With this glass roof, and 20-foot trees placed as carefully as the painting and sculpture, this focal area has remarkable beauty and an intriguing ambivalence; it seems to be indoors and outdoors at once. The court works both as a spectacular receptacle for art, and for pedestrian circulation on several levels. Few interiors can accommodate the scale and strength of today's work this well. The process of movement through the court creates rich, interrelated experiences of art and space.

Flanked by exhibition floors, this central court recalls the gallery-surrounded garden courts of the original National Gallery building that are one of its chief charms. But while orientation has always been a problem in that dauntingly regular plan, here the visitor's relationship to the angled asymmetry always makes his position clear.

The centerpiece is the huge Calder mobile hung from the roof, moving gently against its geometric patterns. Aluminum rods form a sunscreen that looks as delicate as bamboo from below. Bridges cross the court at high and low points, leading to several levels of galleries along its edges. The space is flooded with the moods and patterns of light, sun and clouds; it changes with the time of day and year.

The effect is dazzling, both in the way the geometry captures the eye, and as a demonstration of how the same geometry serves both *(Continued on Page 74)*

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HUXTABLE

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purpose and plan. From the triangular module of the marble floor, to the triangular and hexagonal shapes of galleries and open areas, there is a baroque play of two-point perspective. This all creates a series of superb spatial and sensuous experiences.

This is, in fact, a building whose logic and drama grow from the inside out. The tiers of galleries are made by slicing off the perimeter of the large triangle along the Pennsylvania Avenue and Fourth Street sides. Diamond-shaped corners are then sliced from these spaces to form three vertical, multistoried galleries of more intimate scale at the three points of the triangle, with their own corner stairs and skylights. These are called "house galleries," or "pods." The diamonds are reshaped into hexagonal rooms for more useful gallery space.

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Outside, these stacked corner galleries become towers, with the long "bridge" galleries joining them. A common axis has been created for this building and the original one, although the two sites are off-axis, by drawing a line through the center of the larger triangle that contains the galleries and court; this line "continues" through the older building. The base of that larger triangle also forms the Fourth Street facade that faces the original gallery across a newly paved and landscaped plaza.

The new building's materials are marble facing and exposed reinforced concrete; the basic structure is concrete and steel. Inside, marble is used to indicate vertical elements in compression, such as walls, while exposed concrete is used for horizontal members in tension, such as floor slabs and bridges. The concrete, tinted with crushed marble to tone with the marble walls, is crafted to an incredible satin smoothness from flat surfaces to knife-thin edges.

But this visual relationship of structural elements is not a literal expression of the building's engineering design. The thickness of bridges and lintels, for example, is based on the interior's two-by-five-foot module; these calculations are as esthetic as they are technical. Appearance, therefore, becomes a determinant of the way the structure is handled, as well as an expression of its forces—an inversion of the traditional form-follows-function doctrine of modernism. Perhaps the building is a bit postmodernist, after all.

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What it will probably be called, however, by the professionals currently rewriting the history of modern architecture, is a prime example of the First Heroic Modern Period, slightly delayed, as official architecture always is. This refers to the work of the 1950's and 1960's. That could be a critical or scholarly put-down, but this is not a building than can be put down easily.

Certainly in cost, luxury and size, it is not comparable to anything less than the largest and most architecturally ambitious corporate headquarters— museums and office buildings are the two chief instruments of American architectural patronage today. A.T.&T., for example, is planning to spend more than $110 million on a New York skyscraper of 800,000 gross square feet. The National Gallery's $94 million cost provides 604,000

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National Gallery patron and president Paul Mellon (left) and director J. Carter Brown check a detail in the inner courtyard.

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square feet of totally custom-designed, luxuriously detailed space. A sizable part of that cost has gone for incredibly complex foundation work, technological equipment and special design and craftsmanship, as well as for changes in the old building and a connecting underground link and surface plaza.

The new building may therefore be seen as *retardataire* or as a triumph, depending on individual taste and intellectual fashion. But it has a notable consistency with existing National Gallery collections and policies. It does not break ground; it deals in established excellence. Mr. Pei is a mature practitioner of the generation that developed modernism in this country. And so are his associates on this job: the project designer, Thomas Schmitt, and the project administrator, Leonard Jacobson. The firm has built distinguished museums, city halls, skyscrapers and institutional structures around the world. The East Building and its contents simply represent the finest that informed connoisseurship and discriminating wealth can buy.

But the design also displays very sophisticated architectural skills. The transition from that 80-foot-high court, with immense works of art that include a 30-foot Miró tapestry, to a 10-foot-high gallery that currently contains French Impressionist paintings, some of them as small as four by six inches, is a tour de force; each exhibit comes across magnificently on its own terms. The court is one of the great spaces of our time, considered alone. But the switch from monumental impact to intimate delight is achieved through the masterly handling of changes in scale that have the added attraction of providing remarkable exhibition flexibility.

There are urban skills, as well. The building relates to

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The Study Center's numerous offices and study rooms account for its presenting this heavily windowed facade to the world.

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Jack Mitchell

To the builders belong the smiles—architect I. M. Pei.

the city, in its ingenious use of the diagonals of the L'Enfant plan, and to the site, by capitalizing on its unusual shape as the basic "given" and improvising brilliantly on its variations. It respects the street and its neighbors by establishing heights that resolve the differences between the original neo-classical gallery and the cornice line of Pennsylvania Avenue. No building is an island; above all, not on the Mall.

The East Building is not one of those "warehouses" of closed, amorphous space that museum directors have been commissioning in the mistaken belief that works of art are enhanced, rather than diminished, by isolation in vacuous surroundings. Nor does it embrace the eclectic, "applied" styles of current architectural fashion, in which the "look" is more the result of personal vagaries of choice than of how thoughtfully the uses and structure of the building are defined.

The esthetic vitality of this design comes in part from the kind of creative logic that translates program and plan into strong structural forms, and in part from the revealed tensions of the relationships of that structural solution. The design succeeds to the degree in which a critical balance of these factors is achieved, and visual weight is given to that equilibrium. The combination of freedom and rigor with which these dynamics are worked out determines much of this building's quality and style.

But the best architecture goes one step further than creative logic. Take that incredibly razor-sharp, 19-degree corner that is the point of the triangle of the Study Center facing the Mall and the main building; it is logical, certainly, in terms of the geometry of the plan, and it functions for air intake, but it is pure esthetic bravura against the cascading columns of the Capitol dome beyond. And the way in which the new building becomes part of Washington, from the inside out, balancing the experience of great art with precisely calculated views of those green *allées* and classical monuments that are the spirit of the city, is one of architecture's most seductive and sensitive skills. The building becomes an instrument of enrichment for what is already there, taking its proper place in space and time. Perhaps that is the greatest art of all. ■

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