ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Modern Prepares for Expansion

If it is impossible to imagine New York without the Museum of Modern Art, many of us are finding it almost as hard to imagine a new version, because the museum is in the process of a major change. It has started a $35.6-million expansion of its present building and site on 53d Street that will double its size. As anyone knows who reads these pages, this is an extremely controversial new undertaking — as controversial in its way, and for its time, as the building completed in 1939. The controversy in the 1930's was about the radical modernism of its architecture; in the 80's it is about the nature of the project, which conspicuously incorporates an income-producing condominium tower. The issues are the more complex ones of urban design, or how to build in a city, and money and patronage, or how to keep an arts institution alive.

While the critics have been preoccupied with these matters, the museum and its architects have been designing the new complex. What it will be like can be seen clearly for the first time in a giant model that has just been completed and put on view for staff and trustees in the Founders Room on the museum's penthouse floor. Built at a scale of three-quarter-inch to one foot, it is so large that somewhat less than half of the apartment tower that is part of the plan fits under the ceiling, and the interior changes can be seen as well as those outside. This dramatic model will go on public display in the lobby in October, after the close of the Picasso show.

In current development language, the new building will

Despite its destructive effect on a low-rise neighborhood, the new Museum of Modern Art will 'combine new and old with ingenuity and elegance.'

be a mixed-use structure. A completely new, six-floor wing of about the same size as the existing building will be constructed just to the west of it, and the two will be joined, with substantial revisions of the original, for a museum that will double its gallery space from about 40,500 to 80,650 square feet. The 56-story apartment tower will be incorporated directly into the complex.

If the Museum of Modern Art had planned the current Picasso show to prove how badly it needs these new quarters, it could not have done a better job. Consider, for example, that the permanent collection (or what can normally be displayed of it) had to be completely removed to accommodate the Picasso display. And that those who cannot walk upstairs must wait for what seems like a week for one of two wretchedly inadequate elevators. Once in the galleries, there is not space enough to see the pictures, except on an off, off hour. Large, purposeful groups are descending on the building like hordes from outer space, guaranteeing close encounters of the wrong kind. Restrooms are few, unreachable and unspeakable, and to get through this chaos requires the skill and stamina of a running back. The building is an esthetic slum.

To want the Museum of Modern Art to stay the way it is today, even under much less strain than the Picasso spectacular imposes, can only be put down to *nostalgie de la boue*, or a fondness for primordial mud. More kindly, this attachment to the status quo can be attributed to remembrance of things past. The museum is a hotbed of sentimental recall for its aficionados. Scratch any real New Yorker and the memories and milestones of this remarkable institution come pouring out. For half a century, the Museum of Modern Art has been both an international force and a

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uniquely local phenomenon, an essential part of this city's life and style.

With work already begun next door, the controversy has become academic. Even if it were not, opponents might be disarmed by the final design, which turns out to be a suave exercise in combining new and old with ingenuity and elegance. The problems of transitions, the utilization of awkward areas, are resolved in a creative synthesis of plan and circulation that are an esthetic as well as a functional achievement. There are, by necessity, many compromises. But there will also be some very handsome spaces for the museum's next 50 years, now that it has celebrated its first half-century, and the results are a thoughtful and impressive job.

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If the tower is the dominant element of the design, that is not without a certain appropriate symbolism. Through a complex legal device called the Trust for Cultural Resources, the apartment tower will provide the money to take care of the costs of expansion and the museum's dangerously mounting deficits. The museum's future rides on that tower, for better or worse. It is probably the most artful real estate deal ever devised.

But it is a kind of eleemosynary real estate business, held at very careful, legal arm's length so that the museum's tax-exempt status will not be affected. Through the Trust, the museum has sold its air rights, or the unused space over its small building that could have been filled with construction under the city's zoning, to a team of private developers (the Museum Tower Corporation) for $17 million. This provides immediate cash-in-hand. The Trust will also be used to transfer annual payments from the tower to the museum that will be equivalent to the real estate taxes that the owners would normally pay to the city. The city will get the taxes that it receives now, as if there had been no development at all. And the museum will have a guaranteed income.

The controversy surrounding the museum project has centered on the tower and the Trust. There were questions about the legality of the Trust, and the condemnation powers given to it, and there was a court fight, which the museum won. But what bothered most people — and still does — was the destruction of the special nature of 53d Street that the expansion entailed. This has been one of midtown Manhattan's most attractive side streets, with its varied uses and styles and small-scale older buildings, its brownstones and townhouses converted to shops, galleries and restaurants in a fine architectural, commercial and cultural mix. It is this kind of street that supplies much of New York's characteristic appeal.

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What disturbs those concerned with more technical matters of zoning and development is the fact that these features can be so easily destroyed, and that a tower of this size and bulk can be built, completely legally, on a narrow side street where smaller buildings are more environmentally sound. The museum complex, with all of its sensitivities, cannot be anything but a large, monolithic structure. The midblock tower becomes an irreversibly destructive act.

The trade-off, according to the museum — and it is a very strong argument — was survival. Through this legal and financial maneuver, it was able to convert its greatest economic asset aside from its collection, that valuable midtown site, into money needed for its future. More through good luck than anything else, construction is proceeding when the market for luxury condominiums is exactly right. The gamble — and it is one — may well pay off. But when the motivation for such questionable midblock construction is speculation rather than survival, the city's zoning is called into serious question.

It has been no small job, and it has taken no small team, to translate this complex and conflicting program into a coherent work of architecture. The anguish of the process was clearly visible in early studies. But the style and success of the design solution that has evolved must be credited to the museum's architect, Cesar Pelli, who has had the job of coordinating the entire project. The tower has been through two developers and two versions. Changes in the program have resulted in a notably improved tower design. The new developer has hired the firm of Edward Durell Stone for the apartment layouts, and Gruen Associates is handling the working drawings and supervising construction for the museum. But Mr. Pelli's fine Argentinian hand is everywhere, from the tower's corner living rooms to the subtly detailed, sleek glass skin tying the whole complex together that has become his recognizable trademark.

By electing to stay on the site, the museum faced some enormous design problems; it would have been far easier to sell out at a handsome price and start from scratch somewhere else. But that would have erased the institution's historic identity, so closely allied with the city and the art of our time, and insured the destruction of the garden designed by Philip Johnson that is one of New York's great amenities. In this scheme, the garden is kept virtually intact. That forces the expanded museum into a long, narrow structure along the street. This elongated shape not only makes planning difficult, it makes provisions for adequate circulation almost impossible.

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Mr. Pelli's answer is a brilliant circulation system that will become the museum's most dramatic new feature: a greenhouse-type enclosure added to the rear, or garden-side of the building, will rise to the structure's full height to form an enclosure for escalators. His design removes the present back wall and replaces it with glass, which projects about 18 feet into the garden to create the necessary extra room. The loss will be compensated for by the visual unification of the garden and the bulding. The glass can be truly transparent because the north exposure permits it to be clear and untinted; reflective glass tends to become an opaque wall.

The functional solution will be a spectacular esthetic addition. There will be views of the garden and galleries on every level. And while it is not exactly Beaubourg, there is an interesting kinship in making the glassed-in ride as much of an experience as the art itself.

The raised, eastern end of the garden will also be lost, replaced by a two-story pavilion that will house the public and members' restaurants. By moving the restaurant from its present location, however, part of the garden is regained at the western end. And by resisting the temptation to make the pavilion higher, its smaller bulk relates gracefully to the open space.

There are many real gains. There will be more and larger galleries for the permanent collections, and temporary exhibition galleries with room for several shows at once. Not only will each department just about double its display space, but each will have a publicly accessible study center, as well. The lobby will be one-third again as large, and gallery visitors, office visitors and organized groups will be accommodated separately. The library will be moved and enlarged, and there will be an additional auditorium. Mechanical systems will be completely overhauled.

But the most difficult design decision, because it has so little to do with either function or reason, has been the question of what to do about the present museum facade. The interiors behind it will be completely changed, and the old building will cease to exist as an independent entity. Designed by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone (before Stone renounced modernism for his harem-classical style, and long before such renunciation became fashionable in the name of post-modernism), the Museum of Modern Art is a genuine landmark. It has become as symbolic an image of early modernism as the famous fur-lined teacup. To destroy it is to destroy an era and a milestone in the history of art.

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Early studies for the new building showed the International Style facade eliminated for a more uniform treatment of the enlarged 53d Street front. There were some intellectualized rationalizations about "integrated architectural treatment" and "recall" of the original motifs.

The good news is that the museum has decided not to cannibalize its architectural past. The old facade will be cleaned and restored, rather than resurfaced. The size of the original glass panels is being used as a module for the design of the new glass skin, which will be in shades of warm gray; the same module, with variations dictated by function, will make up the tower. The abstract patterns that result are like a glistening tapestry.

Although the old facade is flush and continuous with the new one, its white marble framing will set it apart from the rest as a discrete architectural and historical event. It will serve as illusion and allusion, as artifact and metaphor. And it will also preserve, or suggest, a more intimate scale for the street.

The early modernists, whom the museum enshrined, would have called this solution a lie. They would have denied the values of art and history in the name of a higher architectural truth. All that has changed in 50 years. If the original Museum of Modern Art was an act of architectural daring, the new building is an act of consummate accommodation. The museum of the 1980's envisions no radical programs or policies. Its aims are continuity, flexibility and enough space to make its unique contributions clear. Neither the truth, nor art, are quite as simple as they once seemed. ■

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

The New Plan for the Modern

Cesar Pelli's design for the Museum of Modern Art. Only the lower portion of the 56-story apartment tower is shown.

Brownie Harris