

# JAMES GRAHAM —

# The Whitney Consensus

When the new Whitney opened last April, it smelled amazing. This is the first thing to say because it's the first thing that startles you to attention. You've already seen quite a bit by the time you make it to the galleries—the building's bulk rising up as you walk down Gansevoort, whipped by Hudson-wet wind; the capacious glass-enclosed lobby under the canted underbelly of the floors above (a cliché of New York's privatized public sphere since Alice Tully); the impatient throng of visitors playing an unwinnable shell game of which of the Artschwager-decôred elevators will return empty first as you press on toward the art that you're ostensibly here to see. The entry hall claims to be of a piece with the city outside, and you feel it. Your senses are still peripherally attentive; your movements still decisively urban. But soon you spill out of the elevator into the top floor gallery, and like a social embodiment of Boyle's law, the change in volume results in an immediate change in pressure—you're moving freely now, and you're greeted by a sudden waft of freshly milled pine. You pause.

The new museum smell is gone now, and that sense of unexpected encounter has also vanished, impossible to sustain across multiple visits. It's certainly crowded, even with timed ticketing. But let's dwell on the pine a moment longer. The museums of twentieth-century modernism—to generalize only slightly—were defined by their white walls. [1] Those white walls remain in contemporary museums but in vestigial form, because the Whitney, like many of its peer institutions of the twenty-first century, is primarily an architecture of floor. Don't be distracted by the finely tuned daylighting and tectonic excess hovering above you—the “sublimated architecture” of a “light modernity,” as Hal Foster has put it—though these are typical of the building's architect, the Genoan Renzo Piano. [2] Ignore even what feels like acres of art-bearing wall. The floor is where the action's at.

It has been argued that the changing scale of art across the past half-century has mandated an equivalent change in the scale of the museum. [3] This increasingly volumetric notion of artistic experience might be seen in the phenomenological installations and vast canvases of Minimalism; the notion of architecture itself as artistic canvas to be operated on; genres like performance art and environmental art; and that interest in perceptual sublimity made so evident by Tony Smith's famed midnight ride on the unfinished Jersey Turnpike. (This shift also has a great deal to do with the equally sublime economics of art spectatorship, with event-oriented installations and ballooning entrance fees

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[1] See for example Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

[2] Hal Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (New York: Verso, 2011), 52–67

[3] See for example, the *Economist*, “Gigantism,” July 18, 2015, [link](#).

and attendance figures marking museums' increasingly codified role in touristic development.) As the narrative goes, these new scales of experience are today borne out in the vast expansions and large-scale satellite franchises being undertaken by institutions around the world—pick your own favorite example.

More notably, in the case of the Whitney, this turn has also increased the popularity of a typology that could be called the warehouse museum—the Tate Modern, Dia:Beacon, MASS MoCA, CaixaForum, the Mattress Factory. [4] Originating in the former light manufacturing workshops of Soho but quickly spreading to exurban sites and accumulating art world caché, such museums institutionalize the ethic of spatial appropriation that redefined artistic practice across the 1960s and 1970s, acculturating a formerly countercultural approach. Their attempt is to adopt the energy and freshness of the galleries—this is in some sense the polemic of the new Whitney's pseudo-galleristic spaces—and their proposition is as spatial as it is about art programming. [5] That Diller Scofidio + Renfro, whose architecture knowingly and somehow seamlessly bridges the logical and the accelerated absurd, are designing spaces called “art bays” and “culture sheds” points to the defining role that the far-reaching floor has taken on in contemporary art. [6] On some level this could be seen as a late capitalist realization of the Miesian “universal space,” an expansive and strictly undefined interior built for flexibility. (Mies's polemical collage for a concert hall in this mode took a photograph of an Albert Kahn aircraft factory as its base; the idea has been a rapprochement of culture and industrial space since its inception.) In a peculiar but predictable turn, the abandoned factory—a favored site of artistic exhibition for decades now—is thus being re-inscribed into the polished and cosmopolitan monumentality of urban art institutions, first in scale and now, at the Whitney, through texture.

The drama of the Whitney's vast reclaimed wood floor—and it is a drama on many scales, each plank a delight of grain, patina, and a ground-down detritus of old fasteners—arises from the building's embrace not of a cohesive modernism but a self-conscious phenomenological pastiche. Mies's Neue Nationalgalerie was an idea about what a museum is; Marcel Breuer's Whitney was an idea about what a museum is. The new Whitney is not an idea, but a set of purposefully ambivalent spaces, dressed in the Renzonian garb of tectonic articulation and a canopy of evenly diffused light. The building's fundamental banalities are obscured by its referentiality. The ceiling nods to the old Whitney with its expressively open coffering, though Breuer's monolithic relentlessness is here a series of logistical decisions. The mystique of Breuer's moody concrete stair here becomes a mystifying concrete-encased journey from the lowest gallery floor through the administrative layers back to the lobby. (The circulation, it should be said, is a mess, with your best all-weather route between the stacked galleries involving a deflating fire stair, despite its dramatic Hudson views.)

Most of all, though, the floor confers a sense of borrowed authenticity through the materiality of what could be termed the factory vernacular. The floor is by the Hudson Company, which specializes in reclaiming wood from decommissioned industry—and it is exquisitely done. The floor is both elaborately technologized, floating above the wiring necessary for a world-class museum space, and willfully rustic in its gaps and imperfections. Jeffrey Lew, the artist and gallerist behind the seminal 112 Greene Street, once quipped that artists

[4] The city of New Orleans has perhaps taken this turn the most literally, with its former Warehouse District having been repurposed as its Arts District since the mid-1970s—the “Soho of the South,” as it has been called.

[5] This observation, among others in this essay, is informed by Jerry Saltz's “The New New Museum,” *New York* magazine, April 19, 2015, which offers one of the more synthetic takes on the Whitney in relationship to a changing ecology of art museums in New York City.

[6] It might be noted here that the new Whitney's fifth floor measures a preposterous 18,000 square feet of column-free gallery, for now the reigning superlative in New York's exhibitionary expansiveness.

like Gordon Matta-Clark preferred exhibiting in his space because you couldn't scratch Leo Castelli's floors. Nearly fifty years later, Manhattan's premier museum of American art comes with floors pre-scratched and seeming to beg for more—secure in the knowledge that its artistic and spectatorial clientele probably won't, or at least not too much, anyway.

In a well-known essay, now a quarter-century old but impressively predictive of where the art museum as a typology was headed, Rosalind Krauss describes the “burnished neutrality” of the “late capitalist museum” after Minimalism. A chief part of this is the experience of being “in the midst of an oddly emptied yet grandiloquent space of which the museum itself—as a building—is somehow the object.” [7] The Whitney signifies that act of emptying, casting itself (like its Meatpacking neighbors) as an act of reclamation, despite arriving already empty. This is the cardinal strangeness of the Whitney, but also its allure.

[7] Rosalind Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” *October* 54 (Autumn 1990): 4.

In late May, a friend reviewed the new Whitney on Instagram and remarked on its “A+ coordination.” For those who might find the comment opaque, he added that it meant “the sprinklers are almost invisible.” If museum architecture has often been associated with formal daring (particularly since the notion of a “Bilbao effect” was put into popular circulation in the late 1990s, with new examples opening regularly around the world), that tendency has been shadowed by an equal-and-opposite desire for architectural invisibility—an invisibility of a very particular and painstakingly detailed stripe. Recall Yoshio Taniguchi's famous line during the fundraising for his expansion of MoMA: “If you raise a lot of money, I will give you great, great architecture. But if you raise really a lot of money, I will make the architecture disappear.” [8] The spectrum on which these museums stake their architectural ambitions, it would seem, is marked on one end by iconic bombast and on the other by fussily demure reveals, with plenty aiming for both. The paradox of hyper-minimalist detailing is the massive effort of architects, contractors, and tradespeople required to materialize that nothingness, and Piano's modus operandi has long been a distinctive blend of tectonic over-articulation and concealment. The claim, as always, is that the architecture steps aside for the benefit of what's on display.

[8] This idea and its specific deployment by Taniguchi are explored in Sylvia Lavin's *Kissing Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

American art, the Whitney will have you believe, has become somewhat easier to see. The ample galleries will bring far more of their collection to the surface; the cannily perfected infrastructures that invisibly envelop you are calibrated for good viewing conditions; the museum's capaciousness guarantees better contact with the objects of display for a vastly greater number. These are the sorts of competencies that museum architects should have, and Piano certainly does.

What else is made visible by the new Whitney? Perhaps more than any recent building in New York City, it puts the act of viewing itself on display, in an act of iconic self-effacement. Sure, the building's confused massing calls attention to the fact that it's a rarity among Manhattan structures in being legible from all sides, an object building rather than an interior space bracketed by neighboring party walls (which in turn asks you to inspect it as a sculpture, despite its pretense to interior-determined and matter-of-fact façades). To some extent it repeats the Taniguchian trope of “putting the city on display” through its broad but self-consciously framed windows outward. But most of

all it is you, the visitor, who becomes—makes yourself—visible. The function of the exoskeletal steel terraces as vantage points for representing your own participation in this pageant of spectatorship, fire stair turned selfie platform, was immediately seized on. (Delightfully, #whitney on Instagram remains approximately split between the museum and the singer.) You are paraded down stairs, witnessed as exhibits through the glass enclosure of the lobby. You beat the High Line at its own voyeuristic game by claiming a still higher ground on the terraced balconies, a literal inversion of the old Whitney’s stepped silhouette. You look out at the city; the city looks back—an exchange of glances long practiced by the neighboring Standard Hotel’s more exhibitionist patrons.

Justin Davidson wryly wrote of the museum’s many opportunities to pause and look at something else that “the new Whitney is a wonderful place for people who easily get bored by art.” [9] It is precisely that, and more—it is a building that points to how extensively contemporary museums’ operations rely on visitors for whom art is often an excuse for something else. The Whitney is hardly alone in this; it might balance those roles of art space/event space/tourist destination more graciously than some of its cohort, but this remains the fundamental premise that undergirds the project.

The new Whitney anchors the center of a Venn diagram between the ongoing homogenization of institutional art experience—the United States seems especially susceptible to Piano-designed art museums, having commissioned them in Atlanta, Boston, Cambridge, Chicago, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and Los Angeles—and the architectural celebrification of what might ought to be called the Highline Development Zone. The Whitney’s opening just so happened to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the city’s establishment of the “Special West Chelsea District” in Article IX, Chapter 8 of the Zoning Resolution of New York City—these are the documents by which the sausage gets made, and buildings like the Whitney are the crystallization of such urban policies. [10] It hardly needs to be said, and yet it must be said, that this all-too-familiar dynamic of culture and real estate is what the museum registers most profoundly, no matter how effectively its experiential dimensions turn our heads elsewhere. In a recent issue of *n+1*, Nikil Saval describes the Whitney’s completion of “a continuous aesthetic experience, from museum art to outdoor urban wonderland” that evinces architecture’s complicity with the venality of developers. [11] This is true enough, and the twenty-first century has seen this de facto neoliberalism inscribed on the city’s skyline again and again. That said, one might also ask if the old Whitney was any less of an aestheticization of that economic nexus that binds the art world to inflationary residential markets for having been a bunker among brownstones—or for having been a better building.

One of the curiosities of the new Whitney is the near-consensus it has inspired among the cadre of mainstream architectural critics. [12] (There are exceptions, of course, such as Aaron Betsky’s condemnation of the Whitney’s “elevated mediocrity.”) [13] Rendered in the style of Zagat, that consensus looks something like this: “It’s located on New York’s choicest site,” “a promising spot in which to flirt with the city,” amid the “surrounding jumble of buildings.” The outside is “ungainly, utilitarian,” “clunky, hulking, inert,” “prodigiously misassembled,” but “quietly active.” The inside is “sensitive, earnest, generous,” “worldly, irresistible,” “handsome, filled with joyous moments,” “nimble,

[9] Justin Davidson, “The New Building Is Open: It’s Filled with Light. And Contradictions,” *New York* magazine, April 19, 2015, [link](#).

[10] The New York City Council adopted this zoning amendment on June 23, 2005, [link](#).

[11] Nikil Saval, “Architecture and/or Revolution,” *n+1* 23 (Fall 2015), [link](#).

[12] The *New York Times* has led the charge in coverage, including their typically polished multimedia treatment with atypically mystifying renderings of a completed building; Bill Cunningham photos and the recent “Summer Looks at the Whitney”; a restaurant review, art reviews, and of course a building review.

[13] Aaron Betsky, “The Elevated Mediocrity of the New Whitney,” *Architect*, June 10, 2015, [link](#).

airy, nonprescriptive.” It is “not a masterpiece,” but it is a “deft, serious achievement.” The old Whitney was “stern,” “muscular,” “powerful, saturnine, dense,” “a rude, charming beast, leaning brawnily over Madison Avenue.” The new Whitney is “vaguely nautical, a big whale.” The comparisons seem to always imply that the two are sympathetic opposites—the new Whitney “is not magical, and doesn’t strive to be.” Renzo Piano “knows what he’s doing”; he’s “elegant, unpretentious,” “one of the most admired” architects today. The art critics are also very much on board, appreciating its urban liveliness and the aforementioned “invisibility” of its interiors. “Art looks better here”; it’s “amazingly comfortable”; it isn’t about “vanity, grandeur, showboating, celebrity.” The wide-plank floors, Jerry Saltz tells us, “are perfect.”

This is a *sensus communis*—one in which you might well participate—that reflects the building’s many fine qualities. It is also tinged with resignation. The new Whitney can only be seen in the context of another storied building uptown, though not Marcel Breuer’s old Whitney, admired as it is by architects, and obligatory as its invocation in reviews might be. Rather, it’s Tanaguchi’s transformation of MoMA (and its impending reworking by Diller Scofidio + Renfro) that loom in the background. When Roberta Smith writes of the euphoria that accompanied the opening of the Whitney, a building designed to “accommodate art and people with equal finesse,” what’s really up for critique is a long line of unfortunate but seemingly inevitable renovations to beloved institutions. [14]

What does it say when we’re so collectively excited about a building whose prime virtue is that it doesn’t undermine its mission to collect and display art? A building that embraces wholeheartedly the “museum industry” of the twenty-first century, but accommodates it a bit more graciously than its fellow institutions? The new Whitney adopts all of the “realities” of museum economics that have guided the renovations at MoMA, the Guggenheim, the Brooklyn Museum, the Morgan Library—projects that have been largely deemed disappointments by art critics. Event rentals, blockbuster shows, peripheral income from cafés and restaurants, and above all an expansion of visitor capacity are all baked into the building. In this regard, the building is another MoMA, down to the distractedly wandering audience with camera phones at the ready. It offers no counternarrative to the expanding capitalization of the art world, and so it has to be met with a certain resignation. Counternarratives, it would seem, are best sought elsewhere.

And yet, and yet. Despite (or within) that sense of resignation, you might find yourself nodding along with this cavalcade of critics who are grateful for the new Whitney’s new generosities. Inside this building—a thornily discursive building that pretends not to be—there are galleries. Those galleries have art in them. It’s great art, and they’re good galleries. The building allows more than its forebear. Whether you find a positive experience of art at the core of this museum, whether you discover in a few years that the Whitney was a rebound lover after the long-standing and ongoing disenchantment of MoMA, whether your mind dwells on the sleights-of-hand that deflect attention from what the building really says about the city today—your opinions will be something of a Rorschach test. Your first encounter with the building might have felt closer to warmth than suspicion, unexpectedly so. Its awkwardness is a saving grace, eliciting something other than the awe that its slicker neighbors shoot for

[14] Roberta Smith, “New Whitney Museum Signifies a Changing New York Art Scene,” the *New York Times*, April 30, 2015, [link](#).

and uniformly miss. It funnels its moments of spectacle away from the galleries. Its vagueness about what, exactly, a museum is has left space for the curators to do their work. Even if you're there to think about the architecture—not the best reason to go to the Whitney—you might just find yourself pulled into that rare intimacy of artistic communion that so many contemporary museums inhibit. That might be the most we can ask of art museums today, or at least the last thing that should be said about them.