

## **The Met Breuer**

From Sculpture to Art Museum and Back Again

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### **Abstract**

*In April 2016, the Metropolitan Museum of Art reopened architect Marcel Breuer's iconic ziggurat building on Madison Avenue, leased for eight years from its former occupant, the Whitney Museum of American Art. Rebranded the Met Breuer, the building has undergone a \$15 million renovation restoring it as close as possible to Breuer's original design, and repositioning the iconic building as both an interface for, and object within, the Met's collection. The Whitney Museum meanwhile has relocated to a purpose-built museum designed by architect Renzo Piano in New York's Meatpacking District, after decades of mostly unrealised plans by Michael Graves, Rem Koolhaas and Renzo Piano to extend the original. In what appears to be a high-stakes game of musical chairs, the Met Breuer presents a very different kind of museum expansion and raises questions around the practice of collecting modernist architecture and its place in the curatorial strategies and approaches of encyclopaedic museums. Built in 1966, Breuer's monumental design for the Whitney Museum asserted the dominance of American modern art to the world and at the same time, took on qualities of minimalist sculpture. The architect himself acknowledged this relationship when publicly presenting the designs in 1963: "... all this is to form the building itself as a sculpture. However a sculpture with rather serious functional requirements...". The Met's treatment of the former Whitney Museum building not only elevates the historical significance of the building, but also amplifies the place of twentieth century American architecture within the Met's encyclopaedic collection. As such, this paper will investigate the changing status of Breuer's building, from Whitney Museum to Met Breuer, as part of a broader trend of museums collecting modernist architecture, and the effect this has on architecture's historical and cultural value.*

## Introduction

The Whitney Museum of American Art was the first national museum dedicated to the work of living American artists. Founded in 1930, its development parallels the rise of Modernism in America and New York City's ascendance to the position of global centre for modern and contemporary art. Over time, its reputation has expanded to include an internationally renowned curatorial fellowship and the longest running survey of contemporary art in America, the Whitney Biennial (1973-). Until recently, the Whitney's institutional status and utilitarian engagement with the building as a vehicle for storing and displaying art, largely overshadowed Breuer's architectural achievement. However, following the Whitney Museum's downtown relocation, the building underwent a significant restoration and under an eight-year lease re-opened in 2016 as the Met Breuer, one of three locations managed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met).

The Met's acquisition of the building raises a number of complex issues concerning the reconceptualisation of the former Whitney Museum as both an interface for, and object within its collection. While there is no dedicated curatorial department for architecture at the Met, its collection includes architectural fragments displayed in period galleries, ranging from the reconstructed ruins of ancient civilisations, to a complete installation of an early Frank Lloyd Wright living room. What then should be made of the recent in situ acquisition and careful restoration of the Breuer building by the Met? This paper will explore the recent trend for collecting modernist architecture through the case study of the Met Breuer, in order to better understand the changing ways that architecture is valued in the museum. The first part of this paper is dedicated to the history of the Whitney Museum and the interwoven debates about Modernism in America that places the Breuer building within a history of museum expansion in the twentieth century. The second part is devoted to the reincarnation of Breuer's building as an example of the changing status of modernist architecture in the museum, and how the recent emphasis on architecture at the Met has resulted in curatorial strategies that address the building in novel ways.

## The Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum Expansion in the Twentieth Century

The history of the Whitney Museum is inseparable from that of New York and its transformation into a hot bed for modern art in the twentieth century. In 1914, well before this transformation, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney opened a studio in Greenwich Village to exhibit works by living American artists. By 1929, Whitney had collected more than 500 works and, along with an endowment, offered to donate her collection to the Met. Although her offer was rejected this led to the founding of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1930 and its official opening one year later in Downtown, New York. Comprised of three re-modelled townhouses, the Whitney Museum focused exclusively on presenting art by living American artists and became an important social space for the artistic community of New York.

This location, however, was considered inadequate, not only in terms of space but as critic and historian Peter Blake reflected in 1966, "also as an expression of the vitality of the painting and sculpture that, increasingly, occupied the space".<sup>1</sup> The Whitney Museum was desperate to distinguish itself from the Met (est. 1870), MOMA (est. 1929), and later the Guggenheim Museum (est. 1959): all familiar visual arts institutions to New Yorkers with identifiable locations, significant collections and prestige. In spite of having distinct mandates, these four institutions have developed in relation to one another, largely as a result of their close proximity, shared supporters and overlapping collecting interests.<sup>2</sup>

The museums themselves were acutely aware of this shared territory, so much so that in 1947, before the Guggenheim was built, an agreement between the Whitney Museum, the Met and MOMA was established. The Three Museum Agreement proposed that works in MOMA's collection that had become "classic" in the modern sense would be purchased by the Met and the money would be used by MOMA to acquire new work. The agreement also involved the Whitney Museum moving into a new

wing of the Met where both collections of American art would be consolidated.<sup>3</sup> The agreement would only last one year before the Whitney Museum would withdraw from the scheme in 1948 and relocate to a building donated by MOMA's trustees, described by Blake as "some sort of warehouse-annex to the Modern".<sup>4</sup>

Propelled by the wave of domestic and international interest for modern art by American artists, not to mention the opening of the iconic Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1959, the Whitney Museum still yearned for its own distinctive building. Finally, in 1963, the trustees of the Whitney Museum interviewed a number of emerging and established architects including Marcel Breuer, I.M Pei, Louis Kahn, Paul Rudolph, Edward Larrabee Barnes and Philip Johnson, to design a new building for a site on Madison Avenue.<sup>5</sup> Breuer's monumental concrete architecture, demonstrated in the commissions for the UNESCO headquarters and Saint John's Abbey, was seen to be well-suited to the iconic ambitions of the Whitney and he was appointed for the commission in 1963. In the same year Breuer presented his vision to the trustees by first asking the question, "What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan?"<sup>6</sup> Breuer followed with a critique of Madison Avenue's superficial character reflected in what appeared to be an alarming number of high-rise glass buildings in the city, making a strong case for his striking proposal that "calls attention to the museum, and to its special dedication..."<sup>7</sup> Acutely aware of the aspirations of the Whitney Museum, Breuer was intent on designing the iconic edifice they wanted.

In 1966, the Whitney Museum (Fig. 1) opened to the public, however, its reception was mixed. Likened to an austere leering fortress, the initial public response was negative.<sup>8</sup> That the new Whitney Museum shared some characteristics with Wright's iconic design for the Guggenheim such as an inverted ziggurat form and sculptural quality (Fig. 2), only exaggerated its apparent failure. Situated just one-mile north along central park, the Guggenheim is now identified as the for-runner to the proliferation of contemporary architectural icons such as the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1977), the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum (1997) and MAAXI in Rome (2010), transforming the museum into a popular tourist destination, where the architecture is its own attraction.



**Figure 1 (left).** The Met Breuer, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author) **Figure 2 (right).** The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author)

In defense of Breuer's building and its perceived failure to reach the same level of popularity as the Guggenheim, renowned architectural critic and historian, Ada Louise Huxtable wrote "In a sense, however, the building is its own exhibit. But unlike the Guggenheim, it is not the whole show".<sup>9</sup> In doing so, Huxtable aligned the sculptural qualities of Breuer's design with the object quality and 'presentness' of minimalist sculpture in the sixties by artists such as Donald Judd and Robert Morris. Completed seven years apart, the Guggenheim and the Whitney Museum, while both examples of iconic modernist buildings, encourage very different architectural experiences, that is, the former through movement and the latter through objecthood. This characterisation of the Whitney Museum building as resonating with minimalist art in the sixties is significant toward building a better understanding of how different forms of value co-exist in modernist architecture and more broadly, why modernist architecture is collected, conserved and curated by visual arts institutions in the present.

It is important to note that Breuer's own design motivations centred around history and symbolism, more akin to the debates on monumentality and the synthesis of the arts in the forties.<sup>10</sup> In fact, just weeks before Breuer was interviewed by the Whitney Museum for the commission in 1963, he delivered the speech "Matter and Intrinsic Form" at the University of Michigan where he reflected on the historical relationship between sculpture and architecture and the potential for material to affect structure and form in what he described as "a sculptural modulation of architecture".<sup>11</sup>

By the time the new Whitney Museum building opened on Madison Avenue in 1966, New York was firmly established as the global centre for modern art.<sup>12</sup> The Whitney Museum was in no shortage of artwork to acquire, in fact, it was already running out of space. To exacerbate the problem, the scale of artworks produced from the late sixties began to challenge many museum facilities. By the early eighties the Whitney Museum was prepared to extend and fundamentally alter Breuer's original design in order to accommodate a growing collection. In 1981, architect Michael Graves was commissioned by the Whitney Museum to do just that, however, he needed the approval from the Landmark Preservation Commission, the City Planning Commission and the New York City Board of Estimate in order to proceed.<sup>13</sup> Between 1981 and 1989, Graves presented three designs to the Trustees of the Whitney Museum, all of which were contested and dismissed.

A more modest opportunity to extend the Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue was finally realised in 1994 through the purchase of an adjacent building. This extension was connected to the existing building with a system of break through panels in the south wall. The Whitney Museum commissioned Gluckman Mayner Architects to manage the renovation which would provide it with just over 10,000 square feet of additional gallery space.<sup>14</sup> Realised over four years, the project included other alterations in response to the Whitney Museum's operational demands such as installing skylights and refurbishing existing galleries to include restrooms. Prior to this, the Whitney Museum had already undertaken minor improvements to the lobby by adding a new admissions desk, expanding the cloak room, and introducing new moveable furniture for its book shop. These interventions, understood to enhance the visitor experience and meet the requirements of a modern museum, reflect the Whitney's institutional priorities where core business functions such as attracting visitors, and collecting and exhibiting works of art are privileged over maintaining the integrity of Breuer's original design.

While these interior architectural interventions helped in part to ease the pressures of storage and crowd flow at the Whitney they were not enough. In 2001, Rem Koolhaas from the Office of Metropolitan Architecture was commissioned to generate a scheme that would transform Breuer's building into a cultural flagship museum for the twenty-first century, however, his claw-like, gravity-defying design was also knocked back. Undeterred, the Whitney Museum engaged Renzo Piano in 2004 to design an extension, which was ultimately rejected in favour of building from scratch on a new site, returning the Whitney Museum to its origins in Downtown, New York.



**Figure 3.** The Met Breuer Lobby, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author)

While the history of the Whitney's various homes reveals a standard set of problems faced by museums and the demands of growing collections, what is of interest to this paper is that it also exposes the competing roles that architecture has played in museums. These issues concerning the value of architecture—and particularly modernist architecture—come into sharper focus in the more recent history of the Breuer building. From the moment the Whitney Museum announced plans in 2004 to design a new, purpose-built museum, the fate of Breuer's only building in Manhattan was uncertain. Reports speculated the Whitney Museum would operate as a two-site institution, housing its modern art collection on the Upper East Side while displaying contemporary art Downtown. However, in May 2011 the Met announced it would lease the former Whitney Museum building with plans to present exhibitions and programs of modern and contemporary art under the reverential name, the Met Breuer.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Met Breuer and Collecting Modern Architecture In-Situ**

The ease with which Marcel Breuer's purpose-built museum was exchanged between visual arts institutions speaks to the larger question of architecture's potential to be collected. Unlike other examples of historical houses and buildings repurposed as museums such as the Musée d'Orsay in Paris or the Kunstmuseen in Krefeld, Breuer's building remains the property of the Whitney Museum. However, the treatment of the building by the Met closely resembles the conservation of an artwork in its collection. Furthermore, putting aside the obvious benefits of a title with dual brand recognition—Met and Breuer—it is also common practice in the visual arts to refer to a work by the artist's last name—the Pollock, the Gorksy, the Rothko. While there are a number of examples of museums leveraging the historical value of buildings, I argue that the Met's treatment of Breuer's building as a work of art presents a new form of engagement between architecture and the museum. Part two of this paper explores the value of Breuer's building to the Met, including its utility as a museum space and its capacity for objecthood and curation. It aims to understand the current threshold for modernist architecture to be collected in this way, as well as the new ways these interrelated values are being leveraged by the museum.

Before the building's transformation from Whitney Museum to Met Breuer, the Met engaged Beyer Blinder Belle architects to restore the building "...as Breuer himself would have, carefully preserving the authentic patina of aging materials and allowing visitors to understand and appreciate the building's evolution over time"<sup>16</sup> Many of the interventions made after 1966 considered to be obsolete were removed and any new alterations to Breuer's original design kept at a minimum. As suggested

by the architects' statement, much of their work was intended to be restorative and understated rather than showy, such as the application of low-sheen wax finish to the bluestone floors to minimise light reflecting across the galleries.

Although the Met Breuer is situated in the Special Madison Avenue Preservation District where the retail and residential character of the streetscape is protected, the building itself falls outside the purview of official cultural heritage protection.<sup>17</sup> As evidenced by the Whitney Museum's previous attempts to adapt Breuer's original design, any major alteration to the building by the Met would be near impossible. Conversely, undertaking a \$15 million restoration goes far beyond the responsibility of the lease-holder. However, there are other agendas that have seen value in a quality restoration, most obviously heritage value—as an example of adaptive re-use—but also the social value generated in response to Met preserving Breuer's only complete building in New York. Less obvious is the realisation of value in the status of the building as an object of art and the Met's authority to historicize Breuer's building within the art historical canon.

For almost 50 years, the Whitney Museum treated the building as a facility, making alterations and minor renovations in response to the institution's needs. While each of these interventions were largely minor, arguably, the building as an object of interest in itself was overlooked. By contrast, and I argue that the Met's restoration and rebranding of the building to privilege Breuer's authorship and reinforce the significance of his contribution to architecture in America, presents a new direction in the way museums manage architectural value. In other words, the historical value of the building as an intact example of high modernist architecture has a new importance to the Met alongside its use-value as a museum. Furthermore, the Met's emphasis on the history of the building - the part it played in the rise of modern Art in America - is now subsumed within the Met's encyclopaedic collection and recalls the intentions of the Three Museum Agreement to install the Whitney Museum into a new wing of the Met almost seven decades prior.



**Figure 4 (left).** Interior view, 3rd floor The Met Breuer, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author) **Figure 5 (right).** Exhibition view, 'Kerry James Marshall: Mastry', The Met Breuer, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author)

Since the lease of the former Whitney Museum building was announced, the Met has developed a number of initiatives to emphasise the historical significance of Breuer's building, as part of its collection development strategy for works of modern and contemporary art.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the Met is not widely known for its collection of this period—even less, its collection of architecture. In an effort to

address this gap, the institution has proclaimed the Met Breuer as an essential element of its collection development strategy. This statement may also be read as an invitation or open call for major gifts of modern and contemporary art from collectors. Unable to compete in the secondary market for artworks of this period, the Met has chosen to appeal to the good will or egos of those who can through leveraging the display value of architecture.<sup>19</sup> In the lead up to the opening of the Met Breuer, the Met's CEO Thomas P. Campbell tells the New Yorker:

I can't raise a hundred million dollars for a single work of art, but what I can do is raise six hundred million to rebuild the modern wing. That's easier to do. The Met takes great pride in putting supporters' names on galleries. And if we rebuild the wing not all the gifts will go to MOMA.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the Met Breuer is a flagship for the Met's modern and contemporary art collection, supporting an institutional strategy that aims to reposition the Met relative to other art institutions and actors who engage directly in the art market. At the same time, the Met Breuer presents a new condition for architecture in museums, one where multiple systems of value—historical, cultural, functional, aesthetic, economic—compete.

Nowhere is this competition better illustrated than through the curatorial strategies employed at the Met Breuer in recent exhibitions and in particular, "Humor and Fantasy—The Berggruen Paul Klee Collection" and "Breuer Revisited: New Photographs by Luisa Lambri and Bas Princen". The latter showcased new photographs of four public buildings by the architect all completed around the same period: the Met Breuer (New York, 1963-1966); the Headquarters of UNESCO (Paris, 1955-61); Saint Francis de Sales (Minneapolis, 1961-66); and the IBM France Research Center (La Gaude, 1960-69). While there could be any number of reasons for this selection, these buildings reflect a particularly active period for Breuer who was considered to be at the height of his architectural career. By commissioning new photographs of timeworn buildings, the Met is playing the role of advocate for Breuer's architecture, while it is also protecting its financial investment by securing the reputation of Breuer as one of the great late modern architects in America.

A related yet very different approach to promoting Breuer's architecture was demonstrated in "Humor and Fantasy" an exhibition of works by the German artist Paul Klee (1879–1940) who, in 1920 joined the Bauhaus in Weimar as a faculty member. This was the same year Breuer enrolled at the Bauhaus as a student, fostering a deep admiration for Klee's teaching.<sup>21</sup> In presenting Klee's work in Breuer's only building in Manhattan, the exhibition performs the dual role of acknowledging Heinz Berggruen's generous donation - the largest collection of works by Paul Klee in America—and highlights the rich and interwoven historical narrative between Klee and Breuer. Both are indicative of the Met's curatorial strategy, that is, to encourage donations of artworks by demonstrating how these gifts will be appreciated, and to increase the art historical value of the building by reinforcing Breuer's associations with the Bauhaus and Paul Klee. Similarly, according to the economists Bruno S. Frey and Stephan Meier:

Museums must make the impression that donations are well used, so that donors will have the feeling that they are contributing to a worthwhile cause. It is crucial that the art institution has a good reputation with the public and the media to encourage a regular flow of donations.<sup>22</sup>

In line with this logic, the exhibition "Humor and Fantasy" is an apt example of how the Met instrumentalises the historical-architectural value to solicit gifts.



**Figure 6.** Exhibition View, 'Humor and Fantasy—The Berggruen Paul Klee Collection', The Met Breuer, New York, 2016 (Source: The Author)

Unlike the iconic architecture associated with new museum buildings and designed by renowned architects the Met Breuer presents a very different kind of museum expansion. The Met's investment in architecture is as an artefact in its collection, a value that draws on traditional notions of architectural heritage, but also the capacity for architecture to be considered an art object in its own right. On this issue, Julian Rose, writer for *Artforum*, describes how the public perception of museum architecture has been conditioned by almost two decades of the Bilbao effect, a program of economic renewal through cultural gentrification and iconic buildings.<sup>23</sup> As a result, modernist buildings like the Guggenheim by Wright and the Met Breuer seem modest and understated. In other words, their importance is no longer in the radicalness of their design, nor in their utility as art museums, but in their historical significance as intact examples of modernist architecture in situ. Capitalising on Breuer's associations with the Bauhaus and Modernism in American architecture, as well as a revival for Modernism in popular culture, the Met presents a new form of engagement between visual arts institutions and architecture, where the latter is conserved, curated and collected by the former. It does this through reorganising systems of value in architecture, to resemble the same systems used in art, such as provenance, condition, and the reputation of the architect.

In this paper, the Met Breuer and its transformation from sculptural museum to collectable architectural object, is a salient demonstration of how architecture has been an instrument of cultural institutions. At the same time, the Met's foregrounding of the historical and cultural value of Breuer's iconic building however represents a new shift in the relationship between architecture and the museum. In particular, it exposes how systems of value in architecture overlap and are leveraged in new ways: the social value of architecture to solicit major gifts from collectors as evidenced in the exhibition "Humor and Fantasy"; the historical value of architecture for curatorial interpretation encapsulated in the exhibition "Breuer Revisited"; the non-use value of architecture that emanates from the public-good qualities of the Met Breuer as an intact example of modernist architecture; and finally, the use value of architecture — characterised as goods and services that flow from material heritage that is generated from admission fees, operational costs, and the cost of the land.<sup>24</sup>

The Met's decision to lease the former Whitney Museum building marks an important and decisive shift away from the commissioning of large scale, high prestige, contemporary architecture towards a more novel treatment of architecture as a collectable work of art. In a sense, the restoration of the Met Breuer is a faithful interpretation of Breuer's own description of the museum in 1963 as a sculpture. However, as a case for encyclopaedic museums today, the Met Breuer demonstrates a more



QUOTATION: What does history have in store for architecture today?

nuanced treatment of architecture where distinctions between economic and cultural value are blurred. This shift in the understanding of modernist architecture as a collectable work of art has implications not only for the museum and how it manages new intersections of changing cultural value, but also for the concept of architecture and how it is understood in the profession, in cultural policy and in the wider community.

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