



Marcel Breuer **New York**



Forms and functions

The architects's approach to the design of the Whitney Museum

In the designing of the project and after establishing its workings and its program, we have faced the first and most important problem: What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan? Surely it should work, it should fulfill its requirements. But what is its relationship to the New York landscape? What does it express? What is its architectural message?

It is easier to say first what it should *not* look like. It should not look like a business or office building, nor should it look like a place of light entertainment. Its form and its material should have identity and weight in the neighborhood of 50-story skyscrapers, of mile-long bridges, in the midst of the dynamic jungle of our colorful city. It should be an independent and self-relying unit, exposed to history, and at the same time it should have visual connection to the street. It should transform the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art.

The sketch of the project shows a sunken sculpture court between the sidewalk and the building, spanned by the entrance bridge; it shows the glass front of the lobby facing Madison Avenue, and the sculpture gallery which provides contact with the street and with the passersby. While the inverted pyramid of the building mass calls attention to the museum and to its special dedication, the mass is surfaced with a most durable, retiring, and serene material: a warm grey granite which is rather dark and has a mild play of reflection of the surroundings. The building, reaching out high over the sculpture yard, does not stop the daylight or the western sun; it receives the visitor before he actually enters the interior of the building. One sees the sunken yard and its sculptures from the sidewalk and the entrance bridge. Also, one sees the lobby and the sculpture gallery through the glass walls.

To emphasize the completeness of the architectural form, the granite facades on both streets are separated from the neighboring fronts: an attempt to solve the inherent

problem of a corner building, which otherwise could easily look like a quarter-section of something. The project transforms the building into a unit, an element, a nucleus, and lends it a direction towards Madison Avenue. The overall granite facing, homogeneous, extending out and over towards Madison Avenue, reaching down into the sunken garden with openings which grow out of the surface, with the modulation of the Madison Avenue gap between it and the neighboring buildings, with the granite parapet along the sidewalk and with the structural concrete form of the bridge—all this is an attempt to form the building itself as a sculpture. However, a sculpture with rather serious functional requirements.

Our purpose was to achieve a simplicity of interior design that would focus visitors' attention on the exhibits. Also sought was flexibility of spaces. Solutions for these demands are offered by rectangular and uncluttered large gallery spaces, uninterrupted by columns or beams and partitioned by means of easily interchangeable floor-to-ceiling panels. A ceiling grid permits and promotes this interchangeability, including flexible use of the lighting. All walls are white, the concrete ceiling a light grey, and the split slate floors a related darker grey.

The floor area needed is about six to seven times greater than the site. This makes top lighted gallery spaces impossible, aside from the fact that daylight would be reflected and colored by the color of the tall apartment buildings opposite, — red or yellow brick. Windows or exterior glass areas would be disturbing and would reduce gallery hanging space. Consequently, our building does not have any use for windows. It has controlled mechanical ventilation, heated or cooled, and controlled, adjustable lighting.

We recognize that lighting is probably the most important single component of a museum's complexity, and the solution here represents rather serious research into the problem. It was tested and verified in a

full sized mock-up before final installation. As windows have lost their justification of existence in this building, only a very few remain, and only to establish a contact with the outside. These few openings, free from the strict requirements of ventilation and lighting, can now be formed and located in a less inhibited fashion, as a purely sculptural contrast to the strength of the main building contours.

It seems to me that large open gallery spaces with interchangeable partitions need a special understanding and care, otherwise the general impression will be too synthetic. To establish our direct sympathy for these spaces, we suggested for the galleries rather unsophisticated close-to-earth materials: roughly textured concrete ceilings, split slate floors, walls covered with flat painted canvas. Furthermore, the design includes a number of smaller, non-interchangeable rooms of definite decoration and furnishings. Painting and sculpture can be shown here in surroundings similar to a home or office.

While the average gallery height is 12'-9" clear, the top gallery height is 17'-6"; a consideration of the increasing size of contemporary painting. The sculpture gallery is double story high, according to the wishes of a number of artists I talked with about this.

A maximum number of offices and the conference room have natural light. They are visually connected to roof terraces by means of glass walls. High parapet walls lend these terrace areas complete privacy: an atmosphere of concentration, indoors and outdoors.

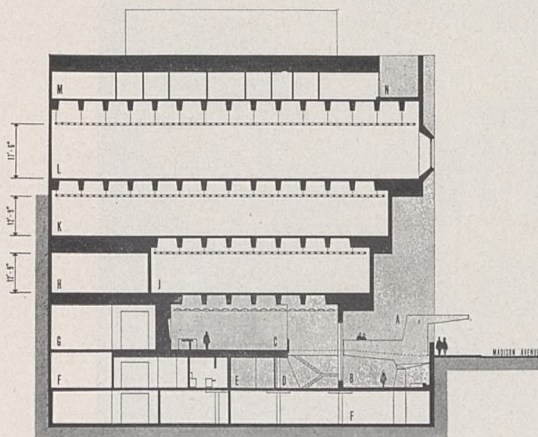
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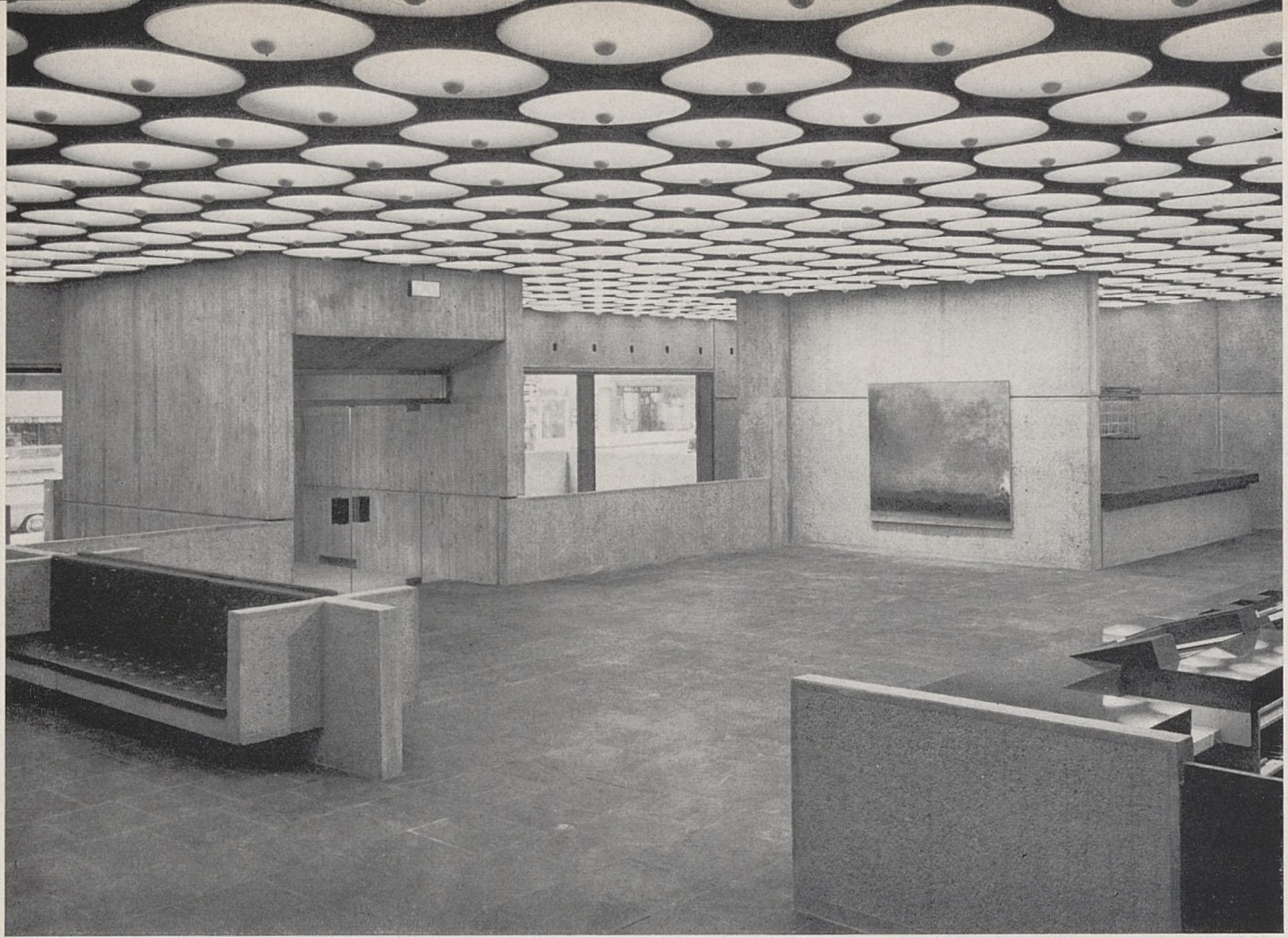
**Marcel Breuer and Hamilton Smith, Architects.
Michael H. Irving, Consulting Architect.**

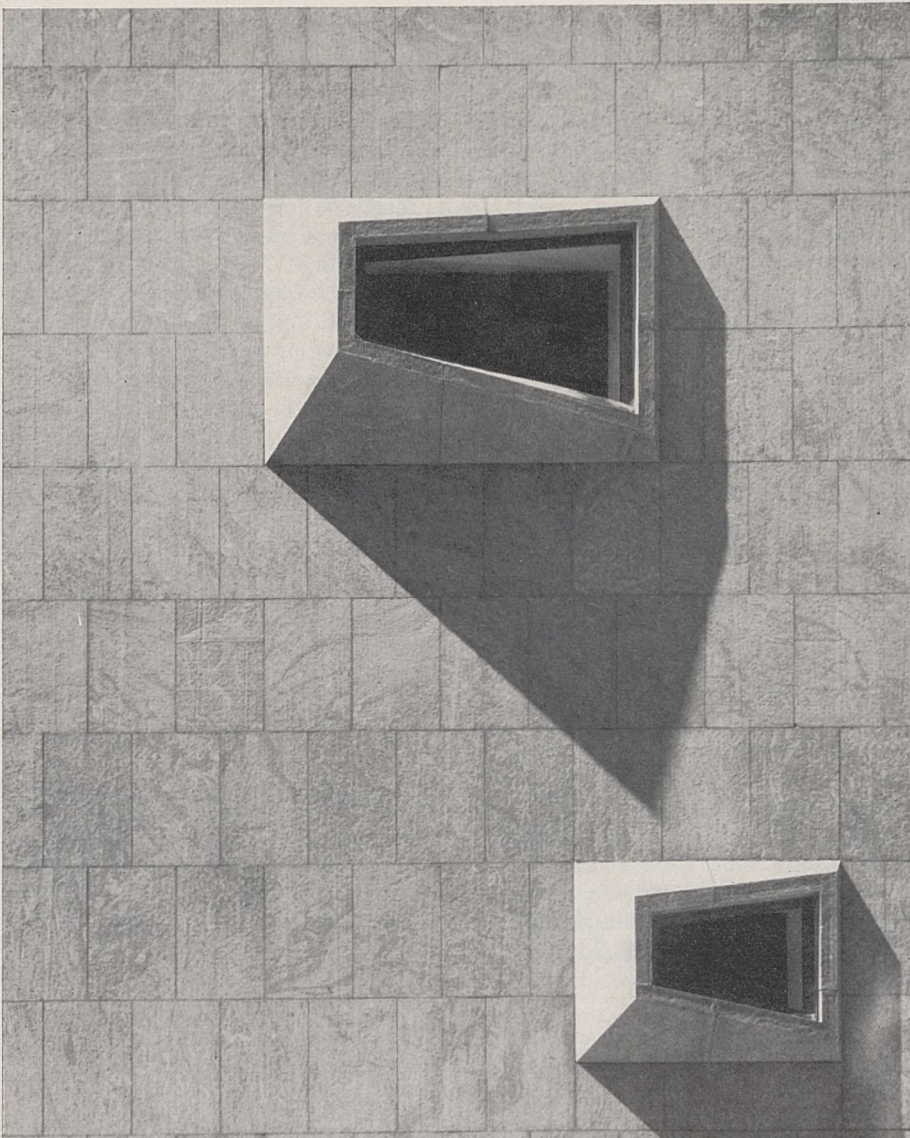
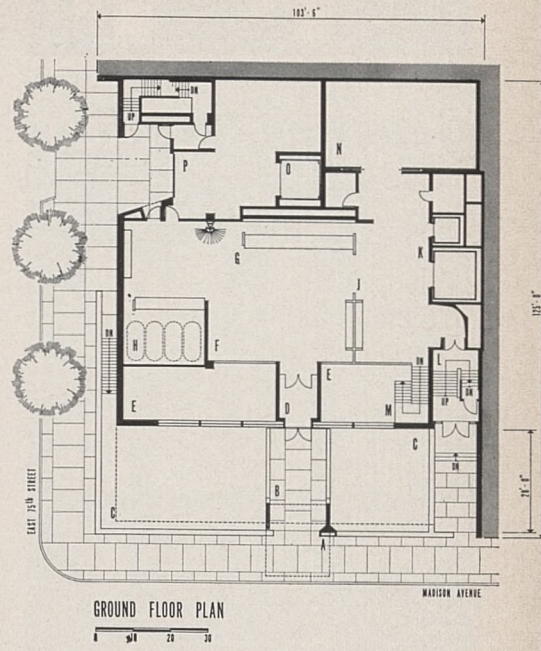
The Whitney Museum of American Art was designed in 1963, built in 1964-1966 and will be opened to the public on September 28, 1966. It has a total gross floor area of 82,000 square feet, with a total net gallery area of 26,700 square feet and a sculpture court of 3,100 square feet. It houses (aside from the galleries on five levels and the sculpture court) a cafeteria for visitors seating 75, a "Friends' Lounge," a lecture hall for 156 persons, a restoration studio, administrative offices with a Trustees' Conference Room for 24 persons and a Reference Library, a receiving facility with truck dock and adjacent carpentry shop and storage facilities, and a full level of storage bins for paintings.

*The materials employed are:
Exterior facing: gray granite, "flamed" surface.
Entrance bridge with canopy, party walls and main stair section: rough concrete.
Glass frames: architectural bronze.
Interior floors: split bluestone paving, waxed; also mosaic parquet and carpeting.
Gallery ceilings: open concrete grid.
Wall finishes: painted canvas, bushhammered concrete, granite of exterior.
Interchangeable walls: painted plywood.
Grilles, elevator doors, etc., profiles: architectural bronze.
Walls of Trustees' Room and Conference Table: gray granite on white carpeting.*



SECTION
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Photos: Ezra Stoller