

Tracce

Seminari
del Dottorato
di Ricerca
in Architettura.
Teorie e Progetto

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DISSECTING BREUER THE WHITNEY'S FORMAL MANIPULATIONS

Series **TRACCE**

Seminari del Dottorato di Ricerca
in Architettura. Teorie e Progetto

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THE PLASTIC GAME OF THE WHITNEY EXPANSION

Orazio Carpenzano

The Vanderbilt dynasty, among the wealthiest in the United States, was of great importance during the period of expanding American industrialization at the turn of the 1860s and 1890s.

Descendants of the progenitor Cornelius include his own daughter sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and founder of the Whitney Museum of American Art. After the end of World War I, she was commissioned to create numerous memorial sculptures, veritable pieces of public art, among which is the famous memorial to the Titanic, widely considered her masterpiece, aped in the unforgettable pose on the ship's prow in the iconic scene of the movie of the same name.

The Museum, while founded in 1931 with the aim of exhibiting already well-known works, managed over time to focus on emerging artists, especially after the Metropolitan's refusal to host the Whitney collection. And so began the process that led to the increase of works from Davis and Demuth to Hopper, Calder and Prendergast, which by the mid-1960s reached the remarkable number of about 2,000 pieces and a library of more than 30,000 volumes. The building designed by Marcel Breuer in 1966 at the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street will, as is often the case in architecture, had a different fate, forced to do a minuet with the new building designed by Piano and open its spaces to the Metropolitan, which had originally been the unintended cause of its creation and which later, albeit for a limited time, asked him to become its dependant.

Unbelievable, but this is one of the many micro-stories in the great book of Architecture that tells the multiple and unpredictable fates of countless works. Breuer's strong modernist imprint is unquestionable; the building is strong, brutal at times aggressive, but above all timeless in its spatial and distributive measure. In its language, in the sensitivity that the great architect always demonstrated in his use of materials and in the compositional clarity that makes the inverted ziggurat, as in Wright's Guggenheim spiral,

rendering it one of the most distinctive landmarks of the New York Upper Eastside Manhattan. The compositional exercise, with its undoubted theoretical-demonstrative implications, proposed to our doctoral students by Anna Giovannelli seems to me to be fascinating and full of obvious implications for the significance it takes on for the compositional techniques it expresses. First of all, in order to extend a building that has strong limitations of space around it, it is necessary to recount its situatedness and, after outlining the theoretical horizon in which the concept of extension as an analytical category of compositional research comes to maturity, to examine the concept of formal, typological, structural transfiguration and dimensional modification.

The focus also shifts to the dimension of identity, which however, cannot be separated from the goal of transformation.

Anna Giovannelli thus reconstructs, didactically, the centrality of the notion of dependence on an original composition and, at the same time, the need to transcend it in order to affirm that essential trait of a need that requires a possible (?) plastic intervention of expansion.

And it is here that the young authors are first faced with the basic choice of whether to intervene or not, and consequently with a series of design steps capable of sustaining the inevitable cultural conflict that opens up to a suitable solution to the hypothesis of an im-possible expansion. An intense exercise that, thanks to its architectural composition, powerfully succeeds in proposing a series of hypotheses that, within our doctoral school, find a full and concrete space to affirm various translation intentions, including that of critically walking out on the paths of conformism and mimesis.



PART I

The Whitney Museum by Marcel Breuer





A TWENTIETH CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL TEXT

Anna Giovannelli

«The work is a fragment of substance; it occupies a portion of space (...). The Text, on the other hand, is a methodological field (...) thus the work sees itself, the Text demonstrates itself, (...) It follows that the Text cannot stop; its constitutive movement is crossing (it can, in particular, cross the work, more works)». *Roland Barthes*, 1984.

The proposal of a topic for a doctoral workshop generally requires two conditions: one of a disciplinary scientific nature in which the subject of the research opens up a space of investigation that is innovative and offers outcomes that update, displace or overturn previous conceptual and operational categories. The other is located within the space of desire, in that place that goes beyond the dimension of contingent necessity to trigger processes of thinking that, at times lacks that objective value that consolidates the sense of research, but opens up new scenarios of the imagination that for the architectural project constitute the foundations of some of its techniques of invention and the principles of its theoretical bases.

The choice of the topic of the doctoral seminar that is the result of this publication – the Museum of American Art in New York, built by Marcel Breuer for the Whitney Foundation in the 1960s – finds its justification perhaps more in the second of the two necessary conditions, namely in that desire to accomplish the impossible space of the extension of the original work, especially because of its absolute distance from objective reality – today the New Whitney has been built in another part of Manhattan and this work is in progressive and inexorable disuse.

However, within the framework of a visionary design experimentation, the object of research can become the context for a meaningful discussion on the potential of the project to transform the existing challenging the cultural conformism that iconizes a work of Modern Architecture.

Thus it is 1966 when 20th Century American Art opened its doors in Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue, at the corner of 75th Street in Manhattan, and the dream of Gertude Vanderbilt Whitney, artist heiress and collector finally takes shape in the construction of a singular treasure house for Art that bursts into the heart of New York's most exclusive and fashionable street.

Introverted and laconic, out of context in its unusual and silent massing, the Whitney Museum appears in its monolithic granite-clad structure, an inverted ziggurat that overturns the typological principles of building codes, «a building as expressive of the inherent irreverence and radicalism of art» (Blake, 1966).

The museum is met with discordant reactions that mostly blamed Breuer for imposing a work of art in itself rather than a container of artworks on the city.

In her New York Times articles, architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable called the building «the most disliked building in New York City but then later acknowledged its inherent quality precisely for being stark and unsettling, harsh and handsome»¹.

Despite adverse reactions, however, with the acclaimed opening exhibition, «Arts of United States: 1670-1966, the Whitney began its adventure that over the years established it as one of the leading works of architecture of the postwar period and whose success triggered a virtuous process that prompted many American cities to build their own museums of American Art.

Marcel Breuer is one of the last protagonists of a resistant Modernity making its way in an affluent and disillusioned society. With the appointment received from the Board of the Whitney, after intense consulting other major players in the American architectural scene including Louis. I. Kahn, Paul Rudolph, and Philip Johnson, Breuer accepted the challenge to create a work which figurative strength expresses the will of an era now ethically and aesthetically dismissed. He is aware of this occurrence, and the unease comes through in his words when he introduces the Whitney at the opening: «What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan' (...) It is easier to say first what it should *not* look like»².

To explain what a museum actually is, he goes on to exclude all those spatial and typological conditions that can be resembled a building; then he lists a sequence of possible characters that in the materiality and form

of architecture combine to construct the figure of a museum, that is «the housing for twentieth-century art. It should transform the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art»³.

Wrapped in granite cladding and separated from the brownstones by two concrete exposed baffles, Breuer's Whitney seems like a self-contained monolith, devoid of any relationship to its context.

Inside, the vertical sequence of rooms, whose variations in size are determined by the increase in area of the overhangs, is ordered in the configuration of spaces ruled by a clear relationship between form and structure. The combination of formal oppositions between compositional, structural and material elements, together with attention to certain essential construction details, make Breuer's Whitney Museum an architectural text to be explored in the depths of its spaces, beyond the inaccessible boundaries of its volume.

Formal Oppositions

Breuer in New York builds an architecture that works by contrast by displaying numerous antinomies that involve different aspects of the shape. Starting with the overturning of weight as the outcome of a design research he has been pursuing since his Bauhaus days with "the invention of that Heavy Lightness" in which the will to challenge gravity reveals the constant formal inversion of the architectural elements that configure the Whitney. As Breuer himself says «Today's structure in its most expressive form is hollow below and substantial on top – just the reverse of the pyramid. It represents a new epoch in the history of man, the realization of one of his oldest ambitions: the defeat of gravity»⁴.

This challenge is set up in the radical action of emptying the basement that realizes the a-tectonic image of the suspended building: the opacity-heaviness of the granite volume is opposed by the transparency-lightness of the glass surface. Here the inversion produces a double vision register: from the in-depth perception, brought about by the progressive retreat of the masses, to the linear surface view that gives back the frontal image, in which the shadows cut out on the facade narrate rather a system of overlapping surfaces on the void of the transparent slab of the ground floor. As the concepts of «Plane and Recession» (Wölfflin 1915) in the building,

the two realities of surface and depth vision coexist thanks to the figurative value Breuer attaches to the relationship between plane elements and masses: «Transparency is definitely one of our objectives (...) Transparency needs solidity. (...) Transparency becomes more so next to – and solidity make it work. Sun and shadow»⁵. The skilful play of sun and shadow reveals the plastic properties of the Whitney in which the combination of mass and light, expresses that necessary condition of the formal opposition between lightness of transparency and heaviness of solidity.

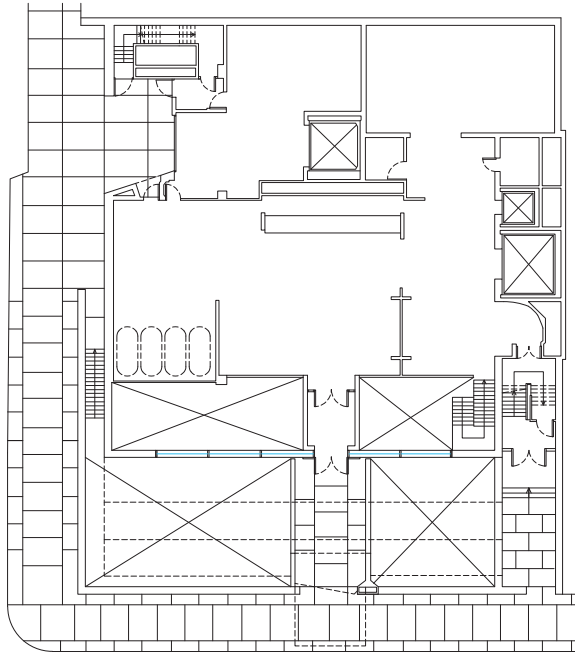
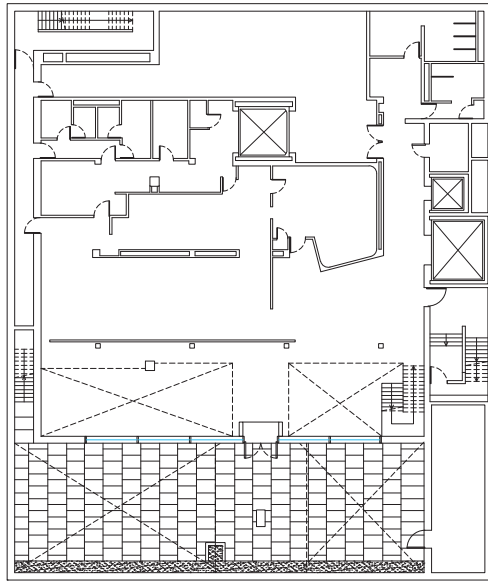
In this sense, the central view highlights another formal opposition by the ambiguous structure of the canopy, which from the front appears as a folded plane, while it actually composes an unusual plastic figure that sinks with its support into the patio below. There is also another contrast here: on the one hand, the enclosed box opens up to the urban level thanks to the large transparent opening that seats the entrance spaces to penetrate into the calm of the museum's rooms but simultaneously distances it from the frantic pace of the city by arranging a kind of moat that likens the building to a «fortress for art (...)».

The detachment, however, lies not only in the horizontality of the void between the inside and the outside, but also in the distancing of the building from the urban body by two thin vertical wings that free it from the continuity of the block.

Inside, the building's architectural layout arranges space according to principles of exhibition gallery flexibility that conflicts with the idea of a mass hollowed out by rooms. Rather, it is an empty box inhabited by vertical panels that measure the height of the space from floor to ceiling; the only perception of mass is entrusted to the few deep windows that produce an occasional relationship with the city.

And if the ground and basement floors organize a spatial sequence by bands parallel to the main façade, the upper floors distribute the exhibition rooms and servant spaces according to a tripartite pattern, perpendicular to the façade itself, with a rhythm of spatial spans that regulate the different heights of the rooms.

Breuer's idea, well expressed by his words on the museum's opening day, is to transform «the building into a unit, an element, a nucleus and lend it a direction toward Madison Avenue»⁶. In fact, the plan layout places the galleries in the central part giving the building a one-way spatial structure



1. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of Art*, 1964-1966, Lower Floor plan and Ground Floor plan



in a sort of hierarchy that also resolves its location at the corner of the block.

The tripartition of the plan is established by the primary horizontal structure made of the dense sequence of beams with a height of 90 cm aligned with a spacing of 240 cm, which rest on a composite vertical system, point-like on the north side with the presence two large steel pillars, and continuous on the south side with a reinforced concrete wall that separates the band of the staircase, elevators and bathrooms.

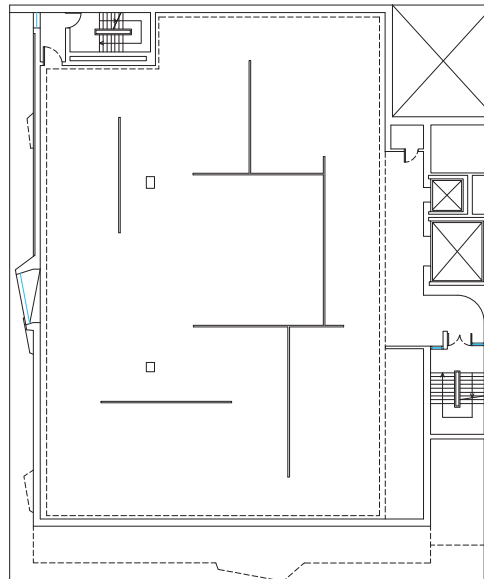
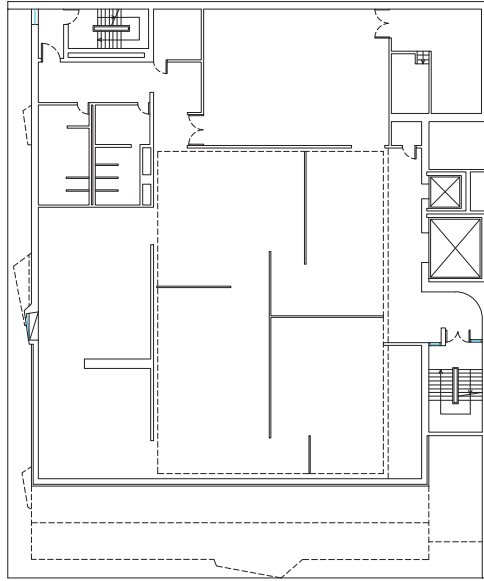
The plan freed from structural obstacles allows Breuer to construct display spaces conceived in the neoplastic arrangement of vertical elements that constantly dematerialize the corner closure of the exhibition fences.

The galleries thus become large rooms with slabs that can be freely arranged in the workspace thanks to the grid system of modular ceiling elements, which also promotes flexibility in lighting devices. The main gallery located on the third floor is the only one in dialogue with the outside through the large window that draws the elevation onto Madison Avenue. The motif of the extruded window with respect to the façade plane is experimented with two different compositional registers: on the main façade, the single large window measures the central axis of the building in the careful negation of the symmetry of the elevation, as the mass is interrupted to open the opening in the south graft containing the servant strip. On the façade facing 75th Street, the façade writing is entrusted to the random arrangement of windows of the same shape but different sizes, freely located «as an architectural contrast to the strenght of the main building»⁷. So, the window is no longer the natural discontinuity of the building envelope that alternates full and empty spaces, but a figural accident that emphasizes its loss of value as a necessary device to generate the right relationship between interior and exterior. Breuer adopts a vocabulary of elements of architectural form and relates them according to the compositional principles of modern abstraction, allowing different spatial configurations to coexist within the Whitney, now entrusted to the plasticity of mass, now left to the labile linearity of planes and punctiform elements. In the use of materials, Breuer also takes the same formal approach that compares the naturalness of stone elements with the design of concrete surfaces in view. Granite on the façades and split slate in the gallery floors are the protagonists of the material and figurative essentiality of this architecture that does not compete with works of art: «we suggest for the galleries rather

unsophisticated, close to earth material: roughly textured concrete ceilings; split-slate floor; flat-painted, canvas-covered walls»⁸. The chromatic neutrality of the exhibition spaces, guaranteed by different tones of grey, from the floors to the ceiling to the exhibition panels, creates the expressive anonymity of spaces that house art as the authentic protagonist of architecture. In this sense, Breuer's Whitney, although enclosed in the precision of its volume, actually opens within itself to a multiplicity of scenarios for Art starting with the abstract figuration of its spatial elements.

Abstract Figuration

Two sources necessary for Breuer's in-depth study of the Whitney Museum form the basis of this close-reading of the work as text. On the one hand, there is a collection of drawings, sketches, written texts and letters of correspondence. These documents, catalogued in the Breuer Digital Archive at Syracuse University, tell the story of the entire design process, from the commission to the opening of the Whitney; on the other, Ezra Stoller's photography, which, like a kind of parallel writing, produces a narrative that describes the characters of this work in its figurative features through the authentic representation of the formal structure: from the depth of the chiaroscuro to the essentiality of the suspended masses, often composing the image of the work with the background of the urban context. Famous is the shot that portrays the inverted ziggurat profile of the Whitney volume in the foreground with the view in the distance of the ziggurat buildings on Madison Avenue; as well as the photographs of the interiors in which the placement of the lens accurately portrays the open spatiality of the vertical planes that outline the exhibition galleries or in the articulation of the fixed furnishings in exposed concrete that design the entrance node on the ground floor, up to the plastic disarticulation of the boundary space between the street and the building that sinks into the sculpture patio. Here, the language of Stoller's photography, in its documentation of the reality of the work, reveals the compositional and formal principles of Marcel Breuer's design, creating a space of intensity that offers the observer-reader a further plane of close-reading that goes beyond the objectivity of the architectural form because he is stimulated by the *punctum* (Barthes 1980) that these images are able to arouse in order to understand the work



2. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of Art*, 1964-1966, Second Floor plan and Third Floor plan

in its textuality. In the introduction to the small and valuable collection of photographs taken by Ezra Stoller, architectural historian K. Michael Hays addresses the figurative value of Breuer's work, arguing that the Whitney's formal nature is suspended «between figuration and abstraction – or better, an abstract figure»⁹. According to Hays, this oxymoron is the result of adapting the figure of the cube from the Bauhaus formal repertoire to the building where the figure of the ziggurat is the result of variations and deviations from pure functionalism, to find the appropriate expression for a refuge for art. Indeed, Breuer expresses the desire for an abstract form by using the elementary grammar of Modernity, however according to Hays «the shape of the Whitney is the certainty of form inflected by the cultural necessity of figure»¹⁰. This awareness of the relationship between the Whitney's form and its figure confirms the oppositions that emerge from the close-reading, in which the meaning of that «sincerity and profoundness of art» that represents the conceptual surplus value of Breuer's work is restored. Hays's interest in Breuer's building is analogous to the interest that the American art historian Micheael Fried had in Frank Stella's formal research as a reaction to the literalness of minimalists like Judd and Bell whose works «lacked any transcendent quality and were an abdication of art's obligation to differentiate and distance itself from quotidian objects»¹¹. In Hays's view, the Whitney is an understated affront to one of the last examples of architectural modernity versus pop drift, revealed by Stoller's skillful lens that «understood the Whitney's shape was itself a statement about the transcendent power of form»¹².

Both the critic's and the photographer's point of view, each with their own specific language, narrate this conflict between abstract form and figuration in the Whitney, and this increases the textual value of Breuer's work. On the basis of this critical premise, the thematic proposal conducted within the Doctorate of Architecture Theories and Design allowed the doctoral students to start theoretical-design experimentation with a close-reading through compositional diagrams that crossed the Whitney in its textuality. Unlike those architects, who in the 1980s confronted the design of his extension by establishing a substantial uncritical distance from Breuer's work, with a few singular exceptions, thus feeding controversies of various kinds, rather than taking the project as an opportunity for a comparison with the design process of its transformation.

The reasons for this exploration of the Whitney as an architectural text



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of the 20th century are instead intended to compose the prelude to a possible design experimentation of the original work in the modern idea of an open vision of form capable of embracing the transformations underlying its formal conception.

To go beyond that resistant idea of the many controversies that have generated over time the symbolic identity of a modernist icon whose fate today celebrates its author in the name – The Met Breuer – given to it by the Metropolitan Museum. Thus, the Whitney without any design action, but only with a restoration and a powerful marketing effort has become today the simulacrum of itself, a musealized art object that celebrates the name of its author within the New York urban framework. But as has always been the case in history, the existing architecture, although representing a constraint to be preserved, has rather undergone numerous transformations, by grafting, addition or superimposition with the creation of new forms, that have manipulated its original structures. In this way, the Whitney can become the theoretical space for an experimentation of form manipulation project by foreshadowing future scenarios of Modernist Architecture.



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5. Breuer M., *Sun and Shadow. The Philosophy of an Architect*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1956, p. 34.
6. Ivi, p. 82.
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11. Ibidem.
12. Ivi, p. 10.

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ARCHAIC WHITNEY

or how to Design a Modern Monument

Lavinia Ann Minciaccchi

«Art is an excess, it is an imbalance, (indeed it is the miraculous balance of an imbalance). Try to understand me: what is normal is not art (...).

The pyramid to be architecture, art, must have the great dimension. Otherwise it is just a school solid or an inkwell.

Have you noticed that at some point the size of dimension makes the art?».

Giò Ponti, 1957.

In July 1963 Marcel Breuer was commissioned to design the new headquarters of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the museum created at the behest of American sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in New York City on a lot at the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street.

«What should a museum look like, a museum in Manhattan?»¹ Breuer questioned during the presentation to the Museum's Board of Trustees; a rhetorical question that preludes to two important themes. First, the need to shape the functional program of a museum: a housing for art with a high symbolic value for the city. This meant dealing with the difficult challenge of the immediate postwar period: the search for a new monumentality, expression of the modern constructive sincerity but free from the stylistic ornaments of the past century and the fascist meanings defeated in World War II. Secondly, the issue of relating or not to the pre-existing architectures of Manhattan, a city characterised by a «dynamic jungle of colours» and by the presence of «business or office building (...), place of light entertainment» and «50-story skyscrapers»². The architect himself answered to these questions stating the will to design an «independent and self-relying unit», marking a break with the city's vitality, but also an architecture «exposed to history», able to «transform the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art»³. The continuity with history that Breuer intends to establish was not in relation to the particular value of the city's

pre-existences (the facades, the materials) but to its universal significance as an archaic monument: a totemic architecture to orient man living in the metropolis.

A year after being commissioned, Breuer reflects on the theme of monumentality and the lesson of history within his preface to the book *Living architecture: Egyptian*⁴: a collection and reading of major Egyptian architecture by Jean Louis de Cenival. In investigating *The Contemporary Aspect of Pharaonic Architecture* Breuer states how current architecture can be attracted to history and in particular to Egyptian architecture, despite the different construction techniques and the drive for continuous renewal in modern society. The attraction Breuer wants to emphasize is not that of the archaeologist or the specialist, but is that of the modern architect who «tests the background of his own work»⁵ in the recurring themes of those architectures. Indeed, although the Hungarian architect is not known for his theoretical reflections, of which there are few examples except for the essays accompanying the 1954 monograph “Sun and Shadows”, this short text is a manifesto of his poetics and a summary of the themes that characterize his architecture of those years.

First of all, Breuer recognizes how Egyptian architecture is a formal expression of the potential of the materials and construction techniques employed. Breuer defines this the *sense of responsibility towards the material of construction*, in other words, the respect for the constructive sincerity. That was shown by the Egyptians in the «great Sphinx – which – expresses monolithic rock, – just as – the bridges of Mailland clearly say: reinforced concrete»⁶, with the ultimate common goal of defying the laws of gravity. Regarding this, in 1954 he wrote:

«Builders in the past always used gravity to defeat gravity. The best symbol of their method is the Egyptian pyramid – very broad at the bottom and narrowing to a point at the top. At each layer it is smaller than on the layer below, because each layer holds up less weight. (...) we can now *cantilever* structures way out into the air – either horizontally, as a projecting balcony, for example, or vertically, as in the skyscraper. (...) The “new structure” in its most expressive form is hollow below and substantial on top – just the reverse of the pyramid. It represents a new epoch in the history of man, the realization of one of his oldest ambitions: the defeat of gravity»⁷.

Ten years before the publication *Living architecture: Egyptian*, Breuer had already expressed his interest in formal experimentation with structure as a manifestation of the “spirit of his own time” by proposing the example of Egyptian architecture. However, the admiration for the tectonics of the Egyptian pyramids was already giving way to an attraction for cantilevered forms, for an atectonic architecture that would find its greatest expression in the Whitney Museum.

Attention to «sense of responsibility towards the material of construction» has been a constant in Marcel Breuer’s work: from experiments with the flexibility of steel in the famous design elements dating from his time at the Bauhaus; his interest in the «wooden balloon frame» in his designs for single-family houses in collaboration with Walter Gropius upon his arrival in the United States; to his fascination with a «heavier aesthetic»⁸, with the abandonment of the frame framework in favour of a structure that not only “supported” the space but “configured” it.

Starting from the fifties, the *sense of responsibility towards the material of construction* intersects with the desire for formal experimentation given the potential of reinforced concrete. In the collective buildings designed since the fifties, structural elements become plastic forms that refer more and more explicitly to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures, giving shapes to the continuous flow of real tensions: from the UNESCO Headquarters experience, to the ribs and structural septa of St. John’s Abbey Church in Minnesota (1953-1961) and St. Francis de Sales Church in Muskegon (1964-1966), to the tree-like pillars of the IBM Research Center, Le Gaude (1960-1962).

Also linked to this formal experimentation with structure is what Breuer calls the *expressive use of materials*; the use of a decoration not applied⁹, but generated by contrasting surfaces and geometric elements defined by the texture of the materials. This idea, again, is traced to the Egyptian bas-reliefs that were an integral part of architecture; a surface modeling between rough and hollow stereometries that defined a chiaroscuro: what Breuer calls «the discipline of the material»¹⁰. If one thinks of Breuer’s predilection for «the use of reinforced concrete, with its plastic, monumental fluid possibilities»¹¹; it would perhaps not be wrong to reread in the use of pre-cast concrete panels a kind of modern bas-relief, a chiersocuro: a texture that connotes the façades of collective buildings¹², making them vibrate in a symphony of “sun and shadow”.

Another trait identified by Breuer in Egyptian architecture is the importance of the *interrelation of open, closed and half open spaces*; the construction of a physical and visual experience of man in the movement from the outside to the inside of an architecture through the compression, dilation or expansion of space. The design of a space in relation to the human scale.

Finally, this trait is linked to the aspiration for *formal simplicity* that achieves its expressive power in the relationship between the human scale and the large scale, what Breuer calls the *beauty or authority of the out-of-scale*. This is perhaps the most fascinating character of Egyptian architecture: the elemental form of the pyramid made seductive by the enormous outsize, where physical size is considered an aesthetic fulfilment in itself.

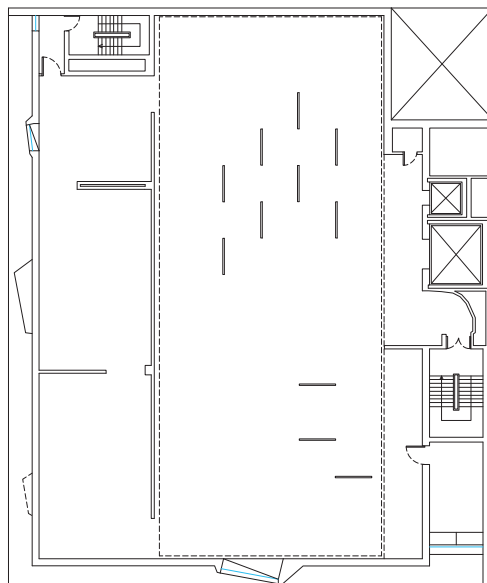
And this is a trait shared by several of Breuer's projects characterized by their large scale in relation to the landscape in which they fit¹³, to the urban fabric¹⁴ or, as in the case of the Whitney, to the dense grid of Manhattan.

In the Whitney Museum in New York we can thus look beyond the figurative analogy between examples of Egyptian architecture and the "inverted step pyramid", noting the coexistence of all these principles. In designing a museum, Breuer reasons about all the issues that contribute to the definition of what we might call an *archaic monument* where the relationship between the form and structure of the building, the use of cladding materials, the sequence of spaces, and the out of scale dimension, all concur to define a symbolic sculpture that alludes to the very meaning of the work of art.

Interrelation of Open, Closed and half Open Spaces

Isolated from neighbouring buildings by two concrete walls, set back from the street line and accessible via a concrete walkway floating over the sculpture garden below, Breuer's Whitney Museum has been called an art fortress, a bunker, a *brooding* and *enigmatic*¹⁵ building.

In reality, this fortress closed to the city, with the main body of the building deliberately interrupted by a few *eyelids* windows, opens to people at street level. As the architect himself stated: «The conception of the project shows a sunken sculpture court between the sidewalk and the building-spanned over by the entrance bridge and it shows the Madison Avenue glass front of the lobby and sculpture gallery: contact with the passer-by»¹⁶.



3. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of Art*, 1964-1966, Fourth Floor plan



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This opening is well described by Ezra Stoller's photographic narrative: the access canopy deliberately exceeds the perimeter of the building and invades the sidewalk to be perceived by people walking down Madison Avenue as an invitation to enter. The walkway itself floats in the open space of the sculpture garden that dialogues with the street level and allows glimpses of the artworks, intriguing passer-by (as noted in the famous photo by Ezra Stoller of the child leaning out to observe what is happening below the street). Also, in contrast to the rest of the building clad in dark granite, the ground floor and basement on Madison Avenue are glazed to allow passer-by to peer inside the building.

The filtered access from the walkway marks the transition to a completely different dimension from that of the city, an almost sacred one. It is the sublimation from the chaos of the city to the intimacy of the relationship with the artwork, which is translated into sculptural elements connecting the outside and the inside. The walkway suspended over the garden patio opens to the sky, allowing the looming granite steps of the overhanging projections to be perceived. Crossing the entrance threshold, marked by an interior volume of exposed concrete, one finds oneself inside a perfectly orchestrated *raumplan* where the neutral surfaces of the ceiling and floor house the partitions and volumes of exposed concrete that articulate the space and define the fixed furnishings. The location of the servant spaces within an L-shaped strip along the partitions that separate the museum from the other buildings on the block allows for great flexibility of exhibition spaces. The ground floor and lower level are visually connected by double heights that allow the perception of the sculptural walkway; the upper floors consist of large galleries articulated by wooden panels and domestic furniture. On the third and fourth floors, however, the exhibition gallery is a single room with continuous floor and ceiling. On the fourth floor the reference to the *miesian* lesson of a unique flexible space becomes more evident, and the trapezoidal window, the only one that opens onto Madison Avenue, frames that portion of Manhattan as one of many works of art floating in space.

The Beauty and Authority of the Out of Scale

In the Whitney Museum in New York, Breuer seems to contradict the *sense of responsibility towards the material of construction*: the building is atectonic, not manifesting in form the scheme of tensions and leaving one wondering how it is supported. The structure is union of structural septa and load-bearing pillars: the former are needed to support the projections onto Madison Avenue, the latter to ensure the flexibility of the space in the exhibition galleries. The dark granite panels used as cladding cover the vertical closures of the building, defining a continuous surface that denies any coincidence between load-bearing and decorative use of the material.

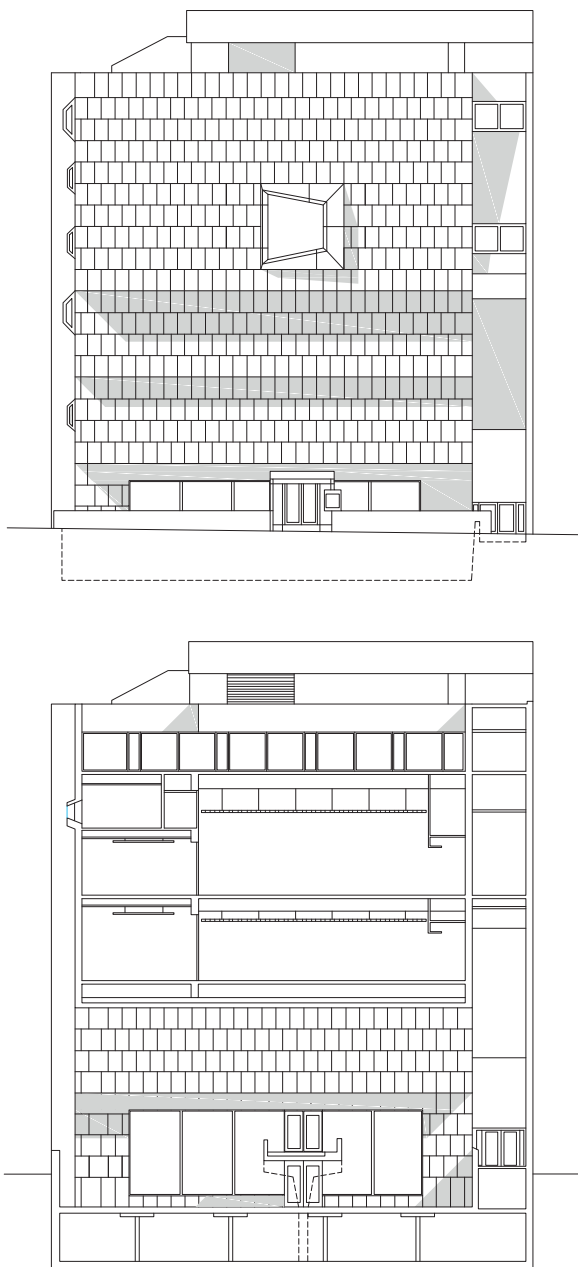
Instead, the structural material, concrete, is left exposed only in the lower part of the building characterizing the entrance canopy and the partitions of the ground floor and basement.

Although these choices seem to contradict the principles expressed in those years by Breuer, the Whitney actually manifests what the Hungarian architect wrote in 1954: the achievement of the technical skills of his own century is no longer expressed by the formal translation of structural tensions, but the building itself in its form, becomes a symbol of the “defeat of gravity”.

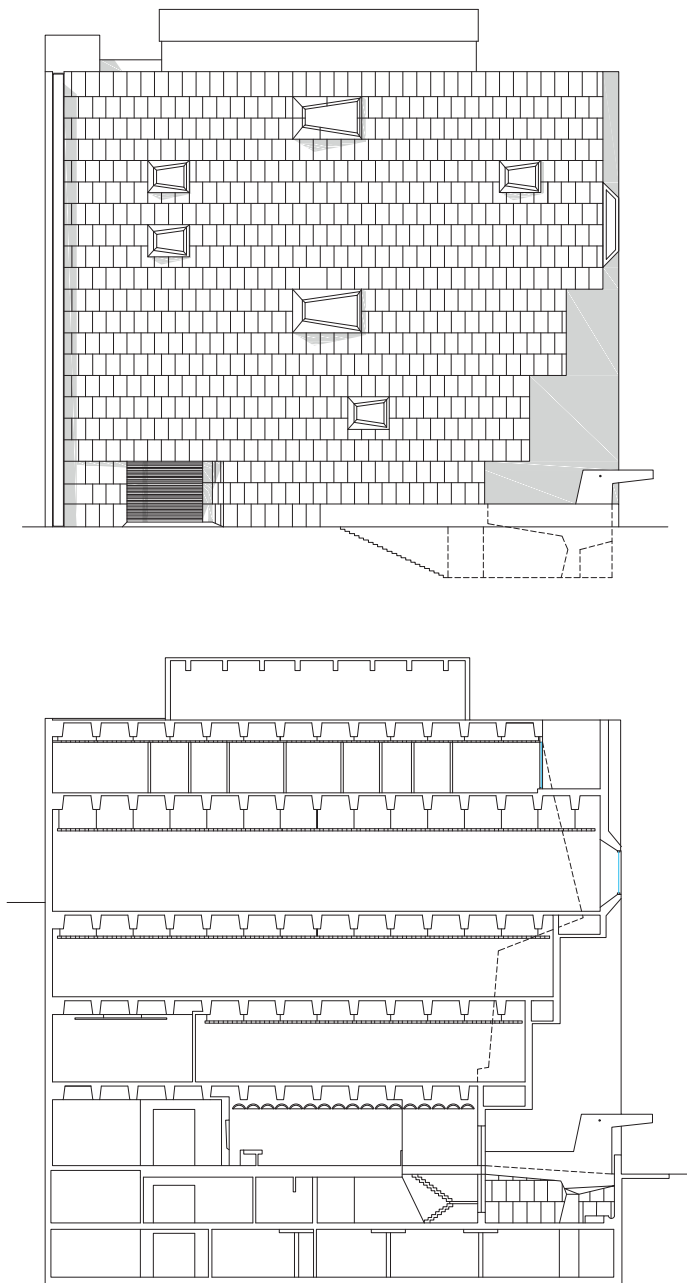
In the institutional buildings of the fifties, the plastic articulation of the architecture was left to what Pagano calls the *secondary plastic*: the pre-cast concrete panels that were defining the chiaroscuro of the façades. Here, in the Whitney Museum, the continuous granite cladding gives the appearance of a “independent and self-relying unit”; the formal complexity is resolved in the *primary plastic*¹⁷, the one that shapes the space.

«The overall granite façade, homogeneous, extending out and over toward Madison Avenue, reaching down into the sunken garden with openings that grow out of the surface, with the modulations 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 to form the building itself as a sculpture. However, a sculpture with rather functional requirements»¹⁸.

The Whitney is a symbolic architecture that alludes not only to the engineering achievements of the 21st century but to the very function of the



4. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of Art*, 1964-1966, Madison Avenue elevation and cross section



5. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of Art*, 1964-1966, 75th street elevation and longitudinal section

museum. The choice to separate it from neighbouring buildings with two septa was indeed necessary to «emphasize the completeness of the architectural form»¹⁹ an autonomous form that could itself rise to the status of a work of art. It is no coincidence that Peter Blake in his article published in *Art in America* states how «it will be attacked by artists as being too plastic, that is, too powerfully competitive with their own work»²⁰.

The relationship between art and architecture, so dear to modern architects, had in fact been investigated by Breuer several times from the art education he experienced at the Bauhaus²¹, both as a student and as a teacher. This relationship had also been translated into the various collaborations between Breuer himself and the artists who had enlivened his buildings with their works, emphasizing the idea of architecture as art²². The Hungarian architect's figuration has always been linked to the experiments made possible by the use of reinforced concrete, with explicit references to primitive art, that art that has attracted many modern artists and architect because was «more conceptual, that is, more synthetic»²³. Breuer's figuration is revealed throughout his career in the plasticity of the structure or vertical enclosures of his collective buildings, in the «ancillary» and totemic elements²⁴ that accompany many of his architectures or, as in the Whitney, in the formal articulation of the buildings themselves²⁵. Architectural historian Timothy Rohan has traced the influence of pop culture²⁶ in this, calling the Whitney a «duck»²⁷ building that is an outward symbol of what it contains.

However, more than the symbol of pop culture, the Whitney Museum in New York manifests an important lesson learned from the *Contemporary Aspect of Pharaonic Architecture*: the character of monumentality given by the *formal simplicity* and *authority of the out of scale*. Although the building's height is in line with the Madison Avenue frontages, it is almost twice the size of its neighbouring building, and its elemental form, the continuous cladding interrupted by a few *eyelids* windows, and its anthropomorphic references make it appear as a large, out-of-scale primitive sculpture. A timeless monument.



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Note

1. Breuer M., *Architect's Statement. Comments at the presentation of the design of the Whitney Museum Project to the Museum's Board of Trustees, 12 November 1963*, in AA.VV. (ed.), *Whitney Museum of American Art*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2000, p. 81.
2. Ibidem.
3. Ibidem.
4. De Cenival J. L., *Living architecture: Egyptian*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1964.
5. Breuer M., *The Contemporary Aspect of Pharaonic Architecture*, in De Cenival J. L. (ed.), op. cit., p. 4.
6. Ibidem.
7. Breuer M., *Structures in space*, in Breuer M. (ed.), *Marcel Breuer: Sun and shadows. The philosophy of an architect*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1954, pp. 68-69.
8. Bergdoll B., *Marcel Breuer and the Invention of Heavy Lightness*, in Bergdoll B., Massey J. (eds.), *Marcel Breuer Building Global Institutions*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, 2018, pp. 34-63.
9. Sullivan L., *Ornament in Architecture*, Engineering Magazine, 1892, pp. 633-644.
10. Breuer M., *The Contemporary Aspect of Pharaonic Architecture*, in De Cenival J. L. (ed.), *Living architecture...*, op. cit., p. 5.
11. Breuer M., *Su Pier Luigi Nervi*, in Breuer M. (ed.), *Marcel Breuer...*, op. cit., p. 253. Translated in English by the author.
12. Here reference is made to buildings: IBM Research Center, Le Gaude (1960-1962); Ski Resort a Flaine in Francia (1960-1979); Armstrong Rubber Company headquarters a New Haven (1967-1969); Department of Health, Education and Welfare Headquarters a Washington DC (1960-1977).
13. Like St. John's Abbey Church in Minnesota (1953-1961) and St. Francis de Sales Church a Muskegon (1964-1966).
14. Like UNESCO Headquarters, Place de Fontenoy Paris, France, (1953-1958) and Atlanta Central Public Library (1977-1980).
15. Hays M., *Introduction*, in AA.VV. (ed.), *Whitney Museum...*, op. cit., p. 1.
16. Breuer M., *Architect's Statement. Comments at the presentation of the design of the Whitney Museum Project to the Museum's Board of Trustees, 12 November 1963*, in AA.VV. (ed.), *Whitney Museum...*, op. cit., p. 82.
17. Pagano G., *I benefici dell'architettura moderna. (A proposito di una nuova costruzione a Como)*, «La casa bella», 27 march 1930, p. 13.
18. Breuer M., *Architect's Statement. Comments at the presentation of the design of the Whitney Museum Project to the Museum's Board of Trustees, 12 November 1963*, in AA.VV. (ed.), *Whitney Museum...*, op. cit., p. 82.
19. Ibidem.
20. Blake P., *How the Museum Works, Art in America*, vol. 54, n. 5, sept-oct 1966, p. 26.
21. Breuer M., *L'educazione artistica*, in Breuer M. (ed.), *Marcel Breuer 1921-1962*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano, 1959, pp. 257-258.
22. Reference is made here to the works of: Alexander Calder in the Rufus Stillman House, Litchfield, Connecticut USA 1959; the sculpture of Henry Moore in the Stae-helin House Feldmeilen, Switzerland, 1957-58; the works by Alexander Calder at UNESCO Headquarters, Place de Fontenoy Paris, France, 1953-1958.

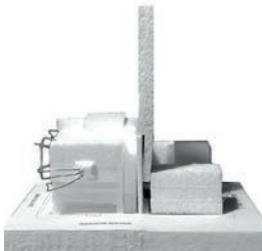
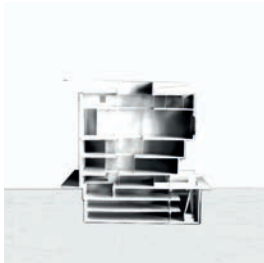
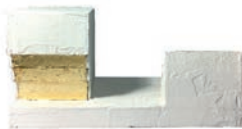
- 23.** Rubin W., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985, p. 11.
- 24.** Reference is made here to those sculptural elements that connote several of Breuer's architectures including the steeple of St. John's Abbey Church in Minnesota (1953-61), the chimney of the Gagarin House in Connecticut (1956-1957), the bell tower of Sisters of Sr. Benedict, North Dakota (1958-1963) or the bell tower of Kent school, Girls Chapel in Connecticut (1967).
- 25.** Like St. Francis de Sales Church a Muskegon (1964-1966).
- 26.** Rohan T. M., *Breuer's Ancillary Strategy: Symbols, Signs, and Structures at the Intersection of Modernism and Postmodernism*, in Bergdoll B., Massey J. (eds.), *Marcel Breuer. Building Global Institutions*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, 2018, p. 314.
- 27.** Venturi R., Scott Brown D., Izenour S. (eds.), *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1972, p. 88.

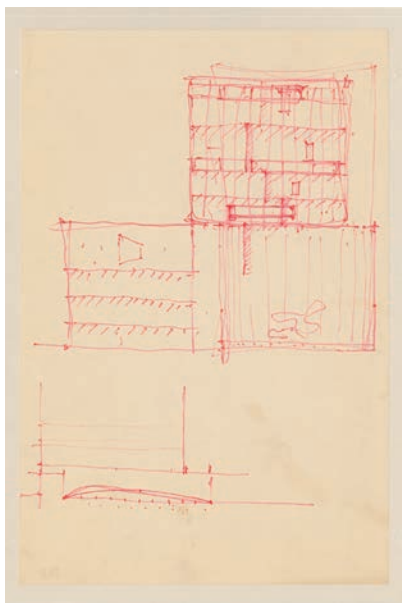
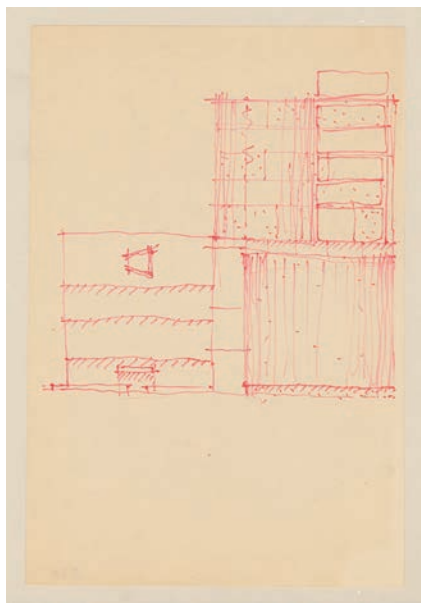
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- Hays M., *Introduction*, in AA.VV. (ed.), *Whitney Museum of American Art*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2000, pp. 1-14.
- Rohan T. M., *Breuer's Ancillary Strategy: Symbols, Signs, and Structures at the Intersection of Modernism and Postmodernism*, in Bergdoll B., Massey J. (eds.), *Marcel Breuer Building Global Institutions*, Lars Müller Publishers, Baden, 2018, p. 314.



PART II
Manipulations





1. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of America Art. Sketches n. 270, 323*, ©Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

FORMAL MANIPULATIONS OF BREUER'S WHITNEY

Anna Giovannelli

«Any addition challenges the predecessor aura».

Michael Sorkin, 1992.

Controversies

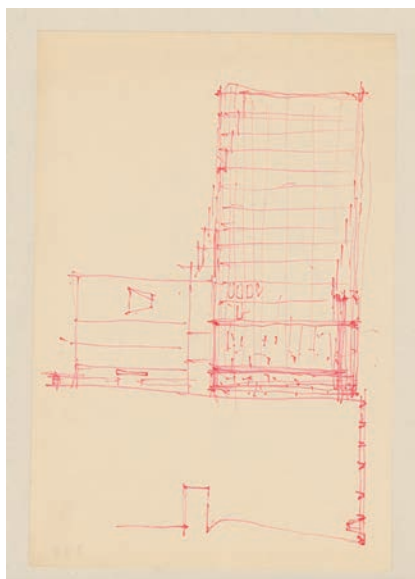
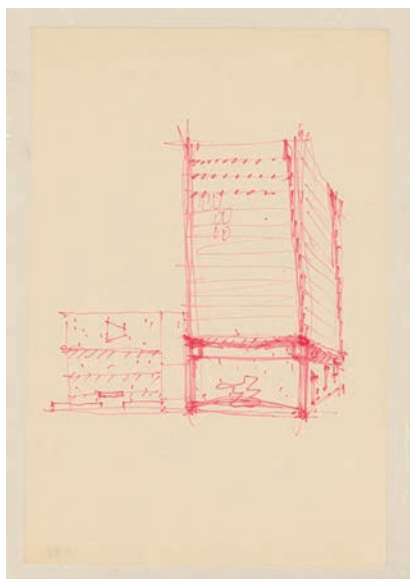
The controversies seem to all stem from the inextensibility of Breuer's Whitney Museum. About twenty years after the Museum's opening, Michael Graves was commissioned to design an expansion for which he worked on three different proposals that triggered strong reactions of dissent for interventions that make the original work disappear. Numerous subsequent projects, from Gluckman Tang Architects to Oma, to Renzo Piano, fuelled bitter debate by reinforcing the building's symbolic identity as an icon of Modernity.

The topic of the doctoral seminar takes this background as a starting point to understand the reasons for the impossible transformation of the Whitney, whereby after the controversy the Museum was moved to the setting of a new building that has nothing to do with Gerturde Vanderbilt's original idea realized in Marcel Breuer's building.

Why has it not been possible to extend the Whitney? Yet numerous projects devised from the 1980s through the early 2000s faced with the challenge of its extension, producing different solutions that operate in addition to the existing building, without ever, or nearly, contaminating it.

Partly these reasons have been explained by Antony Vidler in *Art at the End of the Line*, arguing about Renzo Piano's New Whitney that "peculiar hybrid", as the result of interests related more to «development, growth and real estate issues than art, architecture or the introduction of modest improvement»¹, even as the "old Breuer", brought back into the canon of "good Modernism", was essentially untouchable.

Yet perhaps, Breuer himself had been thinking about the expansion of his Whitney, as evidenced by some of the author's sketches contained in the "Marcel Breuer Digital Archive" preserved at Syracuse University, which unequivocally describe the intentions of an architectural addition project taking place next to the plot. These are five drawings that show different solutions by juxtaposition to the original building, leaving in-between space, occupied by the servant strip of stairs and elevators, as an element of critical distance of the new from the existing, producing a major surface extension that completely encroaches on the plot of old brownstones. With sketches No. 270 and No. 323 the Whitney size becomes the architectural addition module from which a doubling of the original height stands out; or with the juxtaposition of a freestanding building with a singular hollowed-out ground connection revealing the punctiform structure of its supports, as described in sketch No. 271; and again the ziggurat motif outlining the elevation of a new building whose basement seems to retain the old brownstones as the support of an imposing elevation, or to arrange the extension in their rear, in that hidden courtyard, as can be interpreted from reading sketch No. 272; and finally the solution of overlapping boxes with alternating dimensional slippages in sketch No. 273. These sketches, although part of the archive of Breuer's drawings for the Whitney Museum of American Art project, actually have neither signature nor date; furthermore, from the careful search in the Digital archive of correspondence, written notes and other possible clues, no specific reference to assignments given to Breuer to proceed with the design of a possible extension could be found. Nonetheless, the graphic data exists, and so it is reasonable to suppose that, before the 1980s expansion assignments were made and, since «the old Breuer, (was) disliked by its curators for its apparent inflexibility, excoriated by its Upper-East-Side neighbors as a Brutalist eyesore»², Breuer himself engaged in a process of reflection to come up with his own proposal for the Whitney's expansion. Obviously, the effective impenetrability of the building, the constraint imposed by the preservation of the adjacent brownstones, public opinion including perhaps the first-hour opponents themselves, prevented any possible transformation of Marcel Breuer's work. Any design action that could have strengthened, actualized and expanded the museum thus seemed unworkable.



2. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of America Art. Sketches n. 271, 272*, © Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

Design Inventions

These considerations thus found a didactic space for the theoretical-design research proposal developed within Sapienza's Doctorate of Architecture Theories and Design on compositional methods and transformation strategies in the design of the existing: the Whitney is the architectural text that through formal analysis the doctoral students explored by each elaborating their own proposal for possible extensions with actions of adaptation and manipulation of the original form, generating new architectural configurations.

However, the choice to work on the Whitney Museum arose from curiosity and an encounter. After visiting the building in one of its last seasons before moving to its new home, interest shifted from the museum's rooms to its biography with an investigation into the pages of Marcel

Breuer's digital archive, whose documents make up the authentic history of a project.

Then the meeting in Coimbra in the session of the 2nd RMB Conference "Reuse Modernist Buildings"³ in 2108 in which among the speakers, Albena Yaneva presents a case study focusing on her experience as an ethnographer in Oma's studio during the design of the Whitney Museum expansion. The design process of Koolhaas's studio is the observatory for tracing the many controversies surrounding the Whitney's inability to implement its expansion, whereby Yaneva, questioning the reasons for its inextensibility, declares the symmetrical impossibility of providing answers «along the traditional three planes: the aesthetic plane of architectural practice, the institutional plane, and the societal context plane»⁴.

In this sense, according to Yaneva, «the Whitney must be seen NOT as an autonomous, emancipated or coherent modernist object (...) but as a complex ecology, a network of connections (...) To understand the Whitney, it is not enough to question the specific language of its architects, or the social context of its design plans (but) the whole process of transformations of the building in design»⁵. The prospect of a loss of the autonomy of the specific language of architecture in this interesting provocation by Yaneva reinforced the desire to study Breuer's building in more depth in order to understand the generative grammar of this architecture as a space for investigating the manipulation of form.

After all, the attempts to expand the Whitney, which since 1980 for two decades have produced various proposals, and perhaps even earlier by Marcel Breuer himself, with the intention and need for new space were in no way intended to create an entirely new organism.

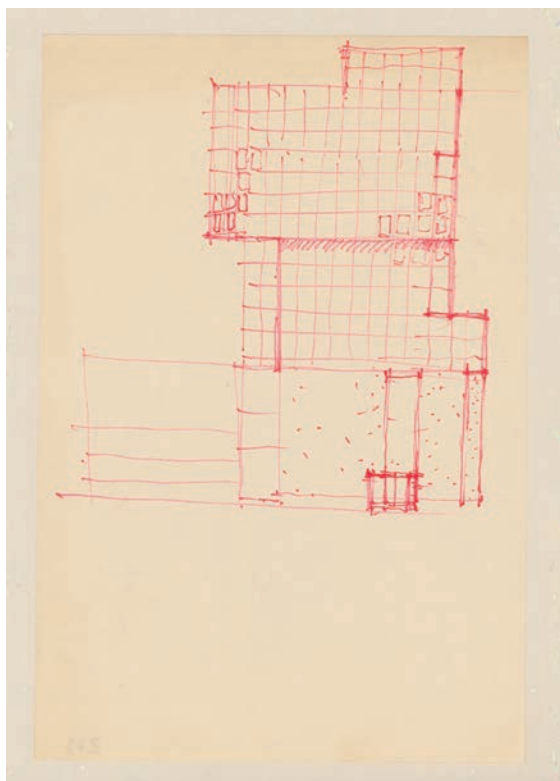
They were thus "Forms of Attachment" as Michael Sorkin states, «in which preservation is the only architectural value anyone is able to agree upon (...) The irony here is that postmodernity is so often applied as proxi-modernity: most of the truly controversial American additions of recent years are expansions of celebrated modernist buildings (...) Modernism can now be relegated to the same chameleon portmanteau as everything else, just another available historical style»⁶. Sorkin's strong critique concerns Breuer's Whitney, among others, in which he clearly explains the intentions of the design proposals for its extension, particularly Michael Graves' composite architectural additions, perhaps among the most daring because they treat the Whitney as the partial foundation of

a radical extension by making it almost disappear. A different one is the Koolhaas's NeWhitney, which reorganizes the museum's spaces, creating a body grafted between the interstices of adjacent buildings and towering over Breuer's building without ever touching it, up to Renzo Piano's proposal in 2004, which features a volumetric tower-like extension thanks to the action of hypogeal grafting. These are projects that, with different actions and languages operate by juxtaposition, but actually give up exploring Whitney's compositional grammar, and then make a new architecture that is detached from the original work: in the critical distance, that exhibits the new with the existing, these projects expand surfaces by constructing another work that surrenders to the impossibility of transforming the original building. Only Koolhaas's project suggests radical action starting from the interior of the Whitney: the interest in the retrospective analysis placed at the basis of the design process that considers the work a "complex ecology", even as it fed the desire to gain a greater awareness of different actors that contribute to the identity of a work, provoked a similar question, that is, how the practice of architectural design, its specific language, its compositional grammar represents the most authentic tool for exploring the deep structure of the original form of a work in the process of its transformation.

Whitney as an *Opera Aperta*

The teaching approach of the seminar entitled "Manipulations of Form. Compositional strategies in the transformation of the existing" carried out in February 2019, with the contribution of 17 PhD students, included the case study of Breuer's Whitney as a critical pretext to experiment with the design process of its transformation and not to make an extemporaneous figurative experience, nor self-referential architectural inventions, deliberately utopian because they cannot be actually realized. Therefore, starting from the enigmatic sketches of the museum extension and proceeding with a close reading of the building that elaborates a formal analysis in order to proceed to the possible manipulation of its form, it is the theoretical action of an ideal project that aims to break the rules and investigate the "latent potential" that inhabits the silence of this extraordinary modern building.

In this sense, The Whitney is an architectural text to be explored



3. M. Breuer, *Whitney Museum of America Art. Sketches n. 273*, ©Marcel Breuer Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries

in-depth, analyzing the elements of an autonomous form, an *opera aperta* able to accept the space of the project as an artistic practice in its most authentic meaning, that is, of that essential device that portrays the changes of our time and puts them into the forms of architecture. The awareness of the relationship between the Whitney's form and its figure can bring back the meaning of that "sincerity and profoundness of art" that represents the conceptual added value of Breuer's work. Rather, this design practice takes strength precisely from the textuality of the work analyzed in its formal folds through a critical reading that brought the PhD students closer to Breuer's architecture, temporarily stripping it of its iconic aura.

The Whitney, therefore, is taken in its architectural reality of form and structure, shape and figure, often compared with other works by Breuer in the analysis of the architectural elements that recur in his formal language, or dropped into the urban context in a dimensional comparison

with adjacent buildings, or simply considered in its spatial autonomy to be explored exclusively within.

The Whitney becomes a methodological field for experimenting with compositional techniques for the transformation of the existing heritage, a sort of design gymnasium that investigates the value of the resistant elements of an architectural structure, not only with the aim of their preservation but with the intention of producing a modification from those elements that lead to new configurations.

The PhD students' proposals provide a composite framework of possible actions, the outcomes of which make up this publication in the synthesis of texts and graphics describing their respective architectural projects. Compositional diagrams, as an expression of Whitney's analytical reading of forms and the construction of critical models that explored their spatial attributes were the conceptual and operative tools adopted by the PhD students in the compositional manipulation of form. The sequence of projects is ordered by thematic cores that combine the different expressive registers of formal actions in the new in relation to the original work. Inside, Inside-Out, Out are the terms of a vocabulary of the manipulation project assumed as devices of form and strategies of intervention in the transformation of the existing.

Inside

The Inside section gathers the proposals that have found a design reason starting from the Whitney's architectural interior. A sort of renunciation of expansion that rather expresses the desire to investigate the figurative potential that emanates from the formal structure of the museum itself. Instead of quantitatively expanding the exhibition surfaces, these proposals aim to qualitatively amplify the formal aspects of certain spaces or generate new relationships that focus on the category of introversion: here, the Whitney is assumed in its monolithic dimension and the operation of excavation is chosen as a device capable of opening up new internal spatiality that manipulate the original condition in a figurative reversal that works in section. From the primacy of the plane of the Whitney's galleries that extend in their closed horizontality, depth is privileged in the simultaneous vision of several spaces, where in the subtraction of surfaces it is the movement of the Subject that becomes the actor of the crossing. As in

Paul Klee's lecture, when explaining the actions that generate the depth of space from the system of horizontal surfaces states: «There, now within the already known space I have constructed a second space that allows the eye a view of its upper surface from above. Therefore it would be more logical to speak of a body than of a space limited to the visual field»⁷.

This is the case with Roberto Germanò's proposal, in which interior emptying creates a vertical sequence of new *rooms* that are related thanks to the cuts in the ceilings and where light also plays a decisive role in the new spatial and exhibition narrative. In the same way, Chiara Rotondi's project, from a critical reading that highlights the lack of perception of the interiority, whose unveiling is made possible through operations of subtraction and *sfogliatura*, comes to realize a renewed vision of the interior spaces in the relationship between the different levels, characterizing the new architectural figures with the criterion of suspension, dear to Breuer since the Bauhaus period.

The motif of the excavation in Lavinia Ann Minciacci's proposal takes on the connotations of a real radical cut that empties the base, generating a new space for art to reinforce the enigmatic character of Breuer's work to be included in the catalogue of mythological animal figures that inhabit his architectures. Again, the excavation as a discontinuous action that receives a pervasive body – which like a parasite penetrates the spaces of the Museum, corrodes the material and the shell and reaches outwards in the form of an unusual connection between the parts – expresses the metamorphic character of Irene Romano's proposal. Here the erosion of the interior creates a sequence of voids, displacing the staircases, which are arranged according to new compositional registers with respect to the original tripartition, in an upward movement that disrupts the entire set-up layout in an inter-penetration of space and time of its crossing.

Inside-Out

Inside-Out denotes manipulative design actions that work on inverting the meaning of certain figurative features of the Whitney that are emphasized in the proposed expansion of the Museum.

In these proposals, the formal analysis of the Whitney's architectural structure plays a decisive role, where the critical reading assigns a singular

value to certain parts that determine a relationship with the exterior, or transfers to another interpretative plane, of an aesthetic nature, those figural elements that become the devices of the manipulation of form to elaborate the museum's expansion project. In these proposals, the formal analysis of the Whitney's architectural structure plays a crucial role, as the critical reading either assigns a singular value to certain parts that establish a relationship with the exterior, or shifts to another interpretative level, the aesthetic one, the figural elements that become the devices for manipulating the form to elaborate the museum's expansion project. These are, however, discrete and unusual additions that are grafted into the interstices of proximity in which the original work remains the final boundary of interventions that act by contiguity, with material juxtapositions or punctual incisions that turn outward those significant characters that describe the Whitney in its original introversion. These proposals for manipulation suggest the transformative dynamic of the Whitney's architectural form taken as a body whose organs with a life of their own are capable of transformation due to the presence of a *Latent Potential* (Jay Gould 1997) «endowed with imprecision, unpredictability and much redundancy»⁸. In their formal autonomy these *organs* express the figurative reasons for the manipulation.

From the inversion of the trapezoidal depth of the large window on Madison as a redundant motif that underlines the infills of Beatrice Conforti, to the primary volumes that by juxtaposition with the outline of the Whitney are configured as pieces of a cast to construct a box that holds the Museum as a work of art in Francesca Sibilio's manipulation. And again, Jacopo Costanzo's punctual addition that places a meteorite on the top of the building as a sort of magnet that attracts vision and generates an unprecedented vertical upward link between the hidden courtyard and the Whitney, inverting access to the museum from above. Lastly, the aesthetic suggestion of primitive sculpture in Isabella Zaccagnini's critical reading of the Whitney grafts the extension of the Museum into the shadow joint between the building and the brownstones, which is configured in the double register of a subtraction-cavity from which a new public space is accessed in the courtyard behind, and a vertical addition, "the sculptural counterpoint" of a new body jutting out from the edge of the urban curtain as an invitation. By analogy with the material expressionism of the window protruding from the façade, this architectural signal reverses the same expressive dynamics on the side front through the repetition of Breuer's formal motif.

Out

The configuration of an all-new building that expands the Whitney into a different architectural framework, yet maintains a critical dialogue with the original structure, is the compositional matrix of the manipulative proposals in Out. These are design strategies that lead formal developments with figurative incisions and space shifts that stem from the Whitney's architectural body, generating new architectural organisms that work by contrast with their own linguistic autonomy outside but in continuity with the Museum. The manipulations of form use excavation as a device of investigation and compositional register that breaks into the introversion of the museum, partially cutting through its envelope and producing an unusual relationship between the interior and exterior of the Whitney's architectural structure through which a renewed museum circulation can be constructed that extends beyond its original boundaries. As Germano Celant writes: «Cutting is thinking and seeing (...) it is arranging shapes and figures, images and materials on the surface and within space, it has a radical process, because it has changed the process of perceiving reality, as much as constructing its new existence»⁹. In this sense, the design action of critical cutting, that is configured in the act of spatial excavation on the existing, configures three manipulations of form. The extension proposed by Enrica Di Toppa who juxtaposes the new architectural organism in space continuity with the existing one with a cut similar to Gordon Matta Clark's Conical Intersects, and by means of an underground excavation transforms the Whitney's rooms with new vertical connections along which a system of double-height spaces opens up. Analogous spatial openings emphasize the visual horizontality between the existing and the new in an interplay of contrasts in Edoardo Marchese's manipulation that breaks up the Whitney's rigid overlapping of planes through analytical cutting of floors whose arrangement triggers new vertical spatial relationships. To the addition proposed by Claudia Ricciardi in which the new building grafts between the brownstones and in turn grafts overhead connections to the Whitney, leaving a void that holds the spatial relationships between the new and the existing. The register of Simone Leoni's extension is different. From his formal analysis of the work based on the metrics of the modular relationships of the primary elements of the Whitney's architectural form, he proposes a manipulation in which the existing is the foundation of an organism

of unlimited growth that builds on the dimensional norm of the original structure and is configured by contrast, of a material – from opaque to translucent – and tectonic nature, where what the Whitney conceals, its extension exhibits.

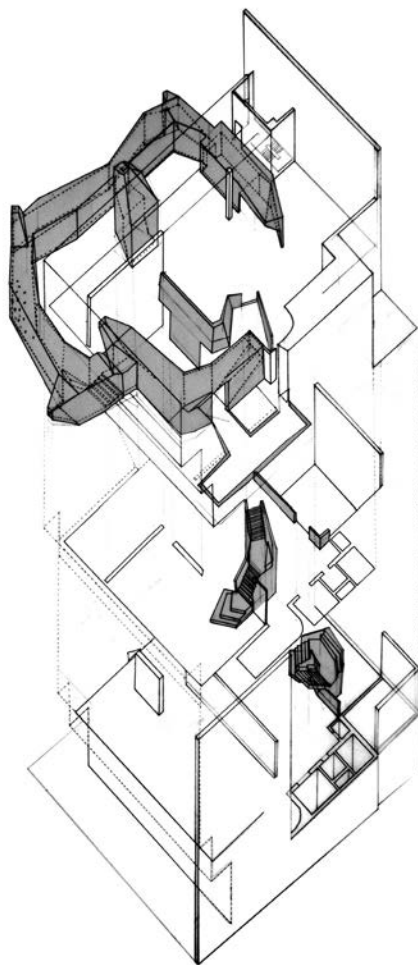
Note

1. Vidler A., *Art at End of the Line*, in Lotus International n. 159, Editoriale Lotus, Milano 2016, p. 57.
2. Ibidem.
3. The RMB Conference 2018 "Teaching through Design" was organized by the Department of Architecture and the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, since 2012. The RMB Conference is an activity of the European Erasmus Project "Reuse of Modernist Buildings – Design tools for sustainable transformations", coordinated by Hochschule Ostwestfalen-Lippe, with the University of Coimbra, the University of Antwerp, the Instituto Superior Técnico Lisboa, the Technical University of Istanbul and Docomomo.
4. Yaneva A., *Modern Architecture as Inextensible. An Actor-Network Theory Account of Contested Design*, Joelho 9, Coimbra 2018, p. 87.
5. Ivi, pp. 88-89.
6. Sorkin M., *Forms of Attachment* (1992), in Sorkin M., *Some Assembly Required*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London 2001, pp. 156-160 (156-157).
7. Klee P., *Das bildnerische Denken*, ed. ital. *Teoria della forma e della figurazione*, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, Milano 1959, p. 143. Translated in English by the author.
8. Gould S. Jay, *L'evoluzione creativa*, in *Indice Internazionale* n. 2, Roma, 1997, p. 175.
9. Celant G., *Tagliare è pensare*, in Celant G., *Artmix. Flussi tra arte, architettura, cinema, design, moda, musica e televisione*, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, Milano 2008, p. 204. Translated in English by the author.



INSIDE

Roberto Germanò
Lavinia Ann Minciocchi
Irene Romano
Chiara Rotondi



I. Romano, *A Metamorphosis*, axonometry, 2019



1. R. Germanò, *Gutta cavat lapidem*, section model, 2019

GUTTA CAVAT LAPIDEM

New Spatial Connections on a Mineral Interiority

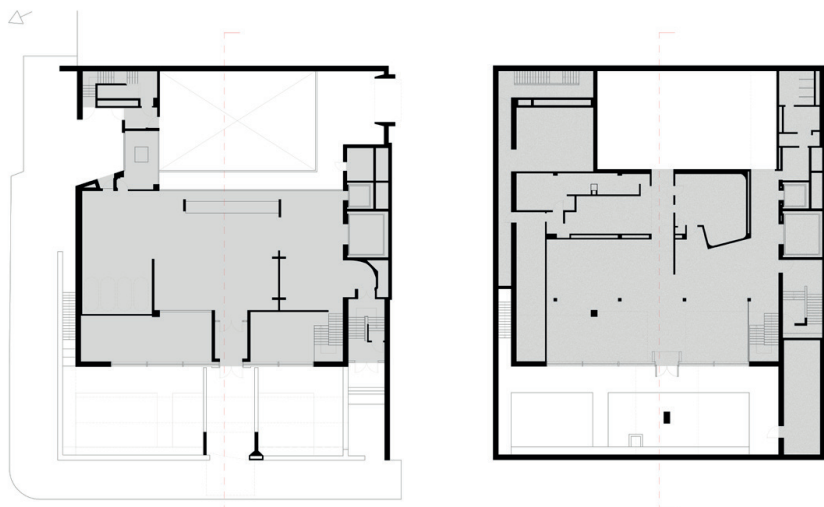
Roberto Germanò

A gray monolith among the brown stones. Petrified geometry perfectly nestled between the blocks of Manhattan's Upper East Side. This is how appears Marcel Breuer's project for the Whitney Museum.

This first framework is close to a narrative form based on first impressions. As of this description, an analytical process can flow and operates synchronously on multiple scales and with multiple overlapping inquiries; a *close-reading analysis*: a form of knowledge supporting the project's theory. With the close reading the volume is torn apart and reassembled, the relationships are measured and verified. This method allows the review of compositional and design patterns as much linked to the history and life of the building as to the creative processes of its designer. This operation is in fact a first creative action which contributes to the *Manipolazione della forma*¹, for the potential transformation towards possible futures of the Museum.

It is therefore necessary to approach the themes arranged on the design table to grasp these clues. A first consideration concerns the museum's own introverted nature. In the relationship with the urban area and with the road section, a very interesting fact happens: a tension between opposing forces. As it moves back from the edge of the site, the building generates a centripetal force that conveys the flows of the road: a potential pause and a slowdown along the sidewalk for all those who is walking on that area. The railing that defines the street level limit condenses this tension, creating a break in the experience and allowing to look out at the lower sculpture garden, generated by the void. A fact that seems perfectly highlighted in the well-known picture of Ezra Stoller, in which two human figures, an adult and a child, stop right on the edge of the museum gazing down, and in which the little child leans out to grasp something of the space below.

This pullback action generates a spatial invitation that is, however, counterbalanced by the attempt to remain part of the urban scenario. The ground-floor entrance is further reinforced by the suspended canopy; the upper floors,



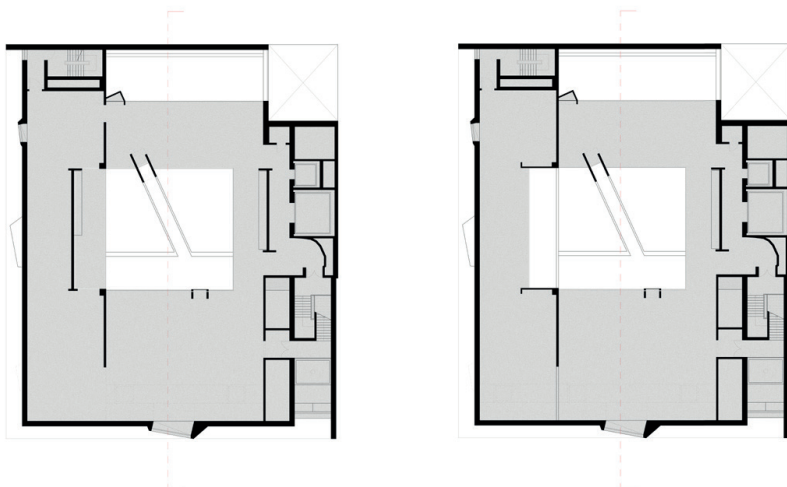
2. R. Germanò, *Gutta cavat lapidem*, plans, 2019

on the other hand, slide and jut out over each other to recover the limit lost on the edge of the site. Making the building appear like a well-positioned antique folding camera framing the New York City street life.

In this compositive tension prevails the introverted nature of the space. Once inside the building, contextual relationships are left outside. Visitors immerse themselves in the exhibition experience.

A further outcome of this *close reading* process concerns both the project and its designer. Despite the articulation on different planes, a peculiar, but not binding aspect of Breuer's poetics seems to emerge: the predilection of horizontality. This is even more evident in the *binuclear* components of Breuer's residential projects. In the case of this museum, the aspect of horizontality is given by the structure of the building itself. The slabs form a well-defined boundary between the floors, and the space seems to be given as a superposition of regular masses on top of each other. Only the lobby constitutes a remarkable point, with its double-height system that enhances the *raumplan*.

The outcome of these layered readings turns into a project of *manipulation* with the intention of amplifying the museum's introverted nature. An architectural transformation all turned inwards. The idea works mainly on the section, on the "vertical" development, and on the attempt of creating new perceptive



relations. A digging operation that generates new voids, multiple patios placed in different heights, generating a system of *open-air rooms*. The new voids have a narrative-driven vocation. They work across the normal use of the floors, becoming a new vertical story within the space, from the cellar to the terrace and vice versa. The existing floor slabs are voided to trigger *raumplan* opportunities. The void that corrodes the section allows new modulations of natural light; it generates short break spaces on valuable points of view; it stimulates oblique views and new exhibition possibilities, crowning at the top with an added body: a new floor. A *cavea* on the terrace, the outermost space of this manipulation, yet still introverted. Designed in section with two distinct analogical registers: the first that recovers the formal intentions of famous projects from Palpacelli to Francesco Venezia; the second that works as a metaphor of the *conca*: an introverted form by definition, capable of welcoming, delimiting and containing within itself. A basin conceived as a crown from which a dense drop of void overflows downwards creating a new spatial interiority.

Note

1. "Manipolazione della Forma" is the name of the architectural workshop curated by Anna Giovannelli within the PhD seminar of the School of Architecture at Sapienza, University of Rome. This essay and the related project are the outcomes of that experience.



THE MADISON AVENUE MONSTER

Lavinia Ann Minciaccchi

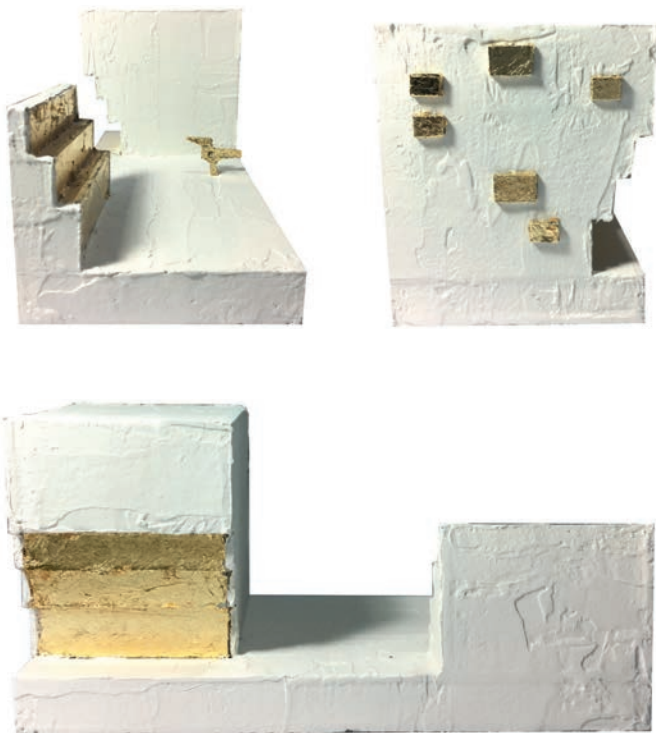
The Whitney Museum in New York is a monstrous figure, strange to the buildings facing Madison Avenue. The tapering of the volume from top to bottom recalls the shape of a body supporting a heavy head. The *eyelids* windows on the north elevation open what appear to be curious and selected glimpses of the city. To the west, on Madison Avenue, the window is a single element in the center of the last cantilevered portion of the building and reminds the eye of a mythological figure. This affinity for an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figure is made even more effective by the dark granite cladding, which like a continuous flaky skin covers the surface of the building.

It therefore took only a short time for this building to earn, among New Yorkers, the nickname Madison Avenue Monster.

However, the Whitney Museum is only one of the many animals that animate Marcel Breuer's bestiary; a bestiary of good-natured figures, of totemic elements presiding over the Hungarian master's architecture.

The influences rang from Gothic to primitive art, via the more recent experiments of modern artists who Breuer had collaborated with during his years at Bauhaus school or his professional activity. Indeed, Breuer's figurative affinity for anthropomorphic or zoomorphic forms reflects the plastic primitivism of modern artists in the «conceptualization and synthesis»¹ of forms.

And so an ancestral butterfly greets the entrance to *UNESCO Headquarters*, a sketchy little man contains the chimney and supports the ceiling of the *Gagarin House* in Connecticut, heraldic figures seem to announce the *St. John's Abbey* church in Minnesota and the *Sisters of St. Benedict* in North Dakota, a mighty man with open arms contains the hall of the *St. Francis de Sales* church in Minnesota, and a duck identifies the entrance from Madison Avenue to the Whitney Museum. Treelike pillars

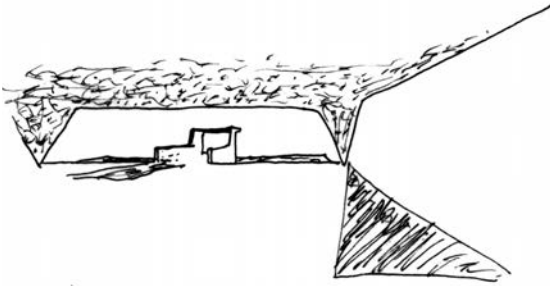
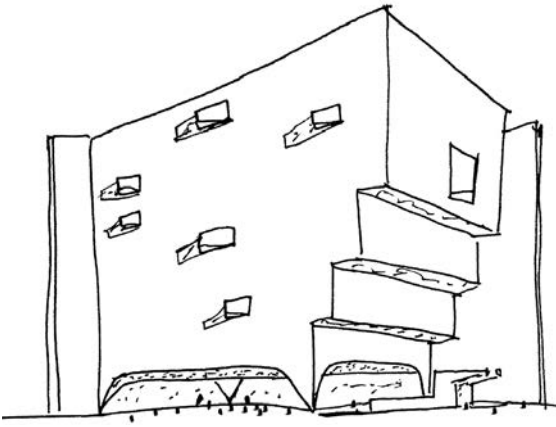


2. L. A. Minciaccchi, *The Madison Avenue Monster*, study models, 2019



3. L. A. Minciocchi, *The Madison Avenue Monster*, model, 2019

4. L. A. Minciocchi, *The Madison Avenue Monster*, sketches, 2019



-somewhat resembling huge ancestral spiders- enliven the exterior and interior of the library at *St. John's Abbey and University* in Collegeville, the *Charles Center* in Baltimore in Maryland and the *IBM Research Center* in La Gaude, France.

Part of this articulated bestiary is also the Whitney Museum in New York: a complex and enigmatic architecture. So what to do to transform it, manipulate it, and make it even more similar to a mythological figure presiding over works of art?

To proceed with the manipulation of the work, it is essential to start with the *close reading* of the building: *dissecting*² the architecture to understand the formal reasons behind the project.

The Whitney Museum is a massive architecture, detached from neighbouring buildings by two septa that exceed the museum's size and ensure

its *formal autonomy*. This detachment is accentuated even more by the servant strip placed close to the septum on Madison Avenue that generates a caesura of shadow. Breuer's choice to scale the building from top to bottom, which seems an elementary operation of subtraction of mass aimed at the *defeat of gravity*, is actually motivated by the desire to open this building-fortress to people, making the basement courtyard visible from the street. Moreover, the glazed ground floor is a further confirmation of the desire to make the interior of the building visible from the street level and open to the city.

However, the excavation of the basement on Madison Avenue generates a deep caesura between the museum lobby and the city, resolved by the zoomorphic entrance canopy.

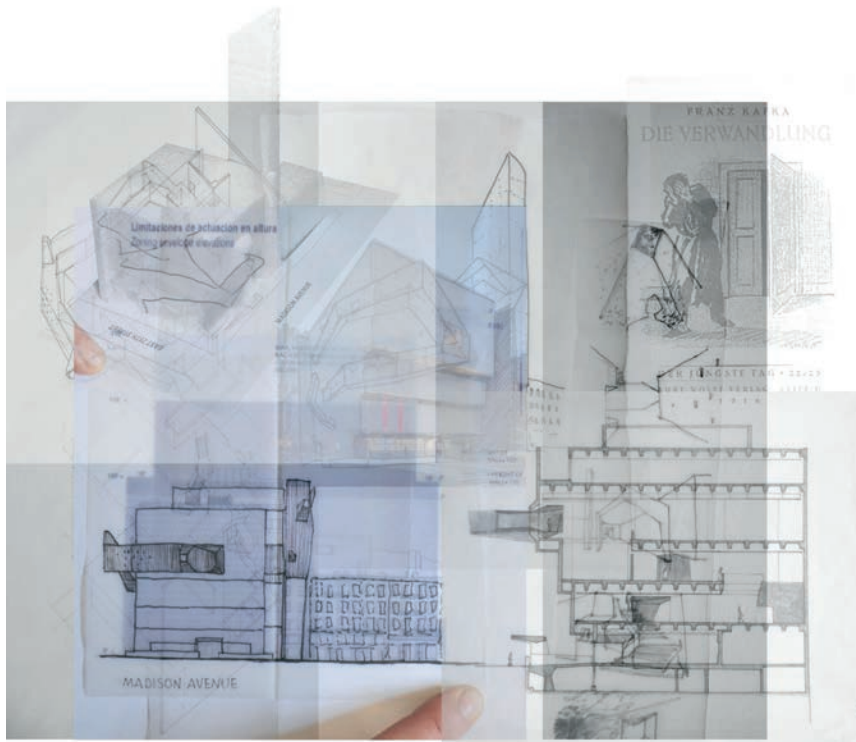
One thus traces, on the one hand, the desire to leave the possibility of peering inside this enigmatic building and, on the other, the desire to define a threshold, a soft transition between the city itself and the fortress of art.

So why not exaggerate this threshold of passage between the city and the museum?

The Whitney Museum, a giant macrocephalic cyclops, is then lifted on slender legs generating a large covered open space; a public place in relation to the courtyard below; a large open-air exhibition hall to be set up with works of art; a break from metropolitan chaos in which to admire framed portions of the city from a privileged point of view, before proceeding inside.

Note

1. Rubin W., *Introduction*, in Rubin W., *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985, pp. 1-81.
2. "Dissect" is the verb proposed by L. A. Minciocchi as the title of this book to emphasize the importance of an accurate reading of all elements of an architectural project in order to proceed to design proposals.



1. I. Romano, *A Metamorphosis*, meta collage, 2019

A METAMORPHOSIS

Short Reflection on the Uncanny as the Matter of Modification

Irene Romano

One morning, as the citizens of Manhattan awoke from uneasy dreams, they found that the MET Breuer in Madison Avenue had been transformed into an enormous bug.

It was still in the same location, but its profile did not have the solid presence of a quiet Cyclops anymore. Now, the wide window at the third floor of the museum had been flooded by an oblong volume which, just like a taenia, was spreading itself across the crossroad's space, surrounding the building. As if that wasn't enough, it seemed that the creepy entity had also colonized the interior, as consuming its space, reaching the brown-stones, and from there climbing back up in search for light and air.

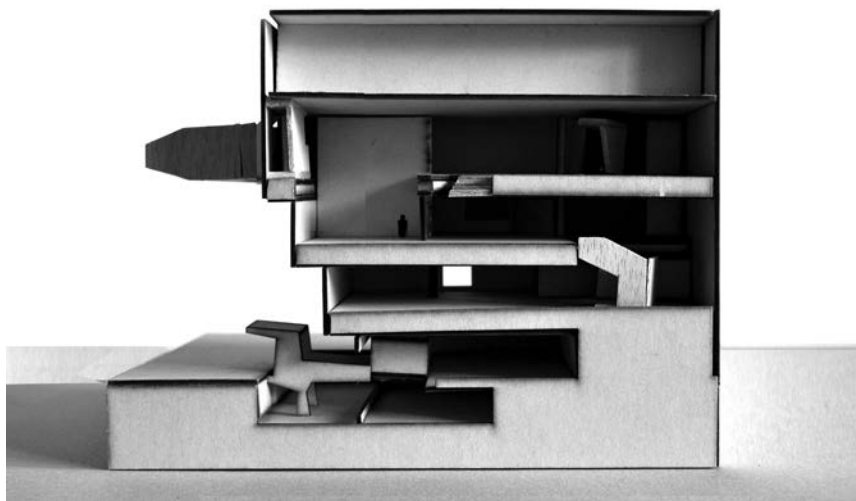
From the sidewalk, nothing seemed to have changed: under the stepped profile, the double height hall opened so wide as to suck in the public space, swallowing the visitors who dared to cross the access bridge. Surely, the atrium had always looked curious and ambiguous with its spatial interpenetrations, but it led to a welcoming and reassuring sequence of well-defined, Modern, clear and clean exhibition rooms.

After that day, everything changed.

The bug had eaten the slabs, leaving behind nothing but empty spaces. The three exhibition floors were now connected by sequences of double heights: it was no longer possible to tell apart the themes and the periods of the exhibited works, while stairs had been regurgitated along the way, forcing a continuous upward and crossing motion in the spaces¹.

Finally, the corridor suspended above the crossroad unfolded with its walls made of a translucent material that, like a chrysalis, let the light in. In certain spots, it felt as if walking on the void, in others, openings framed parts of the city or fragments of the sky: that last space seemed built for nothing, but the guests' wonder.

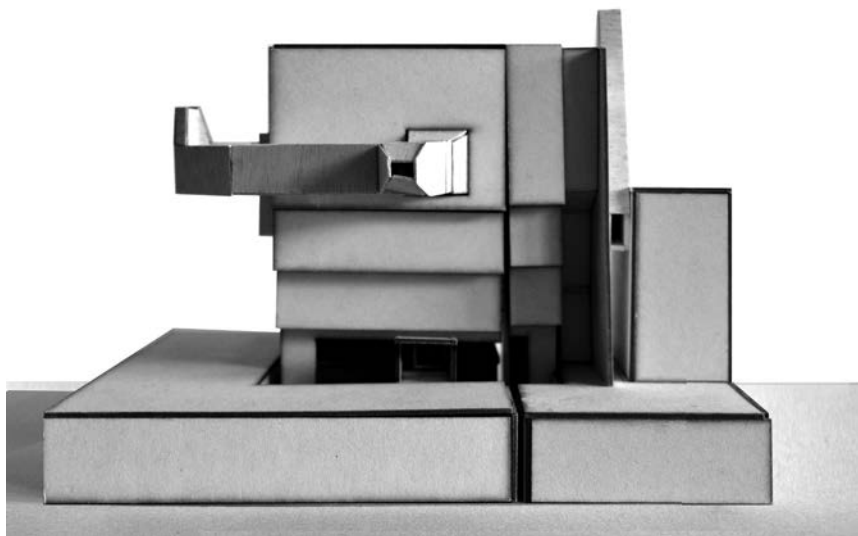
«I am not sure that I really like the shape of the Whitney; but I am sure that I would never bother to go to visit the place if I did. And I am glad



2. I. Romano, *A Metamorphosis*, section model, 2019

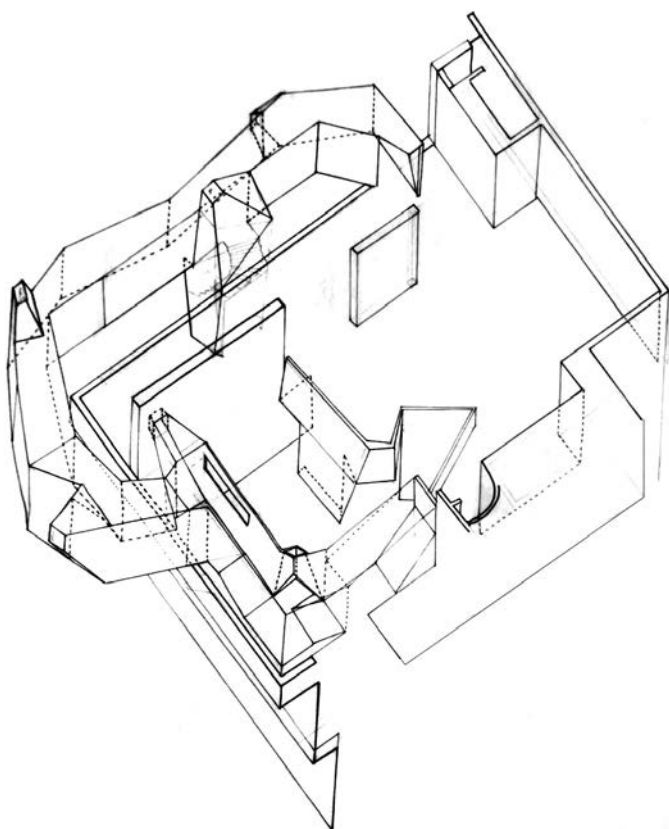
that Breuer's "Kunst-Bunker" bugs me as do few other buildings in New York because I want to be bugged by museums, not tranquillized by them. I have been back to see that beast of a building more often than I have looked at any other New York edifice under construction, and so I suppose it works very well indeed as a symbol, at least for me»².

The manipulation project described above as a metamorphosis, is based on the assumption that, paradoxically, Marcel Breuer designed an «uncanny architecture»³, a *Heimlich*. We can define as "uncanny" any distressing operation based on the overlapping of the domestic and familiar with the hidden and repressed dimensions of the existence⁴. In Breuer's project, the familiarity of a stone building, opposite to the continuous facades of the International Style, is contradicted by the absence of a traditional composition, by the construction of an out-of-scale, primitive sculpture. In the interior, the rooms offer the comforting space of a Modern exhibition-machine, capable of transforming the vitality of the street into the sincerity and profundity of art, an ability Breuer himself sought in his work.



3. I. Romano, *A Metamorphosis*, model, 2019

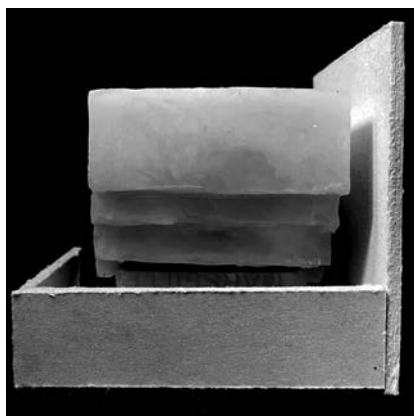
Moreover, we can observe that the definition of uncanny clearly applies also to any act of modification. In this instance, the metamorphosis was born precisely from contradictions which already existed in the building: the ones between inside and outside, the full and the empty, urban space and exhibition space, the neurotic life of the Metropolis and the artistic contemplation. As if the modification is nothing but the revolution of ideas that have been kept lurking and repressed and now become explicit and dominant: therefore, the uncanny is the only way in which a modification can occur, both in the explicit form of a creepy parasite and in the hidden one of every other reassuring appearance.



4. I. Romano, *A Metamorphosis*, Third floor axonometry and plans, 2019

Note

1. Regarding this operation, the description of the project of manipulation was inspired by the comparison between the Whitney section and the Library of Atlanta's, a later work of Breuer. Furthermore, it must be mentioned the solution A by OMA for the expansion of the Whitney, which the submitted project explicitly references in terms of space, concept and museological principles.
2. Blake P., *How the museum works*, "Art in America", (monographic volume on the Whitney Museum), sept-oct 1966, pp. 26-29.
3. Vidler A., *The architectural uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, MIT Press, Cambridge-London, 1992.
4. Freud S., *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Europäischer Literaturverlag, Bremen, 2014.



1. C. Rotondi, *Rillevare*, Study models, 2019

RI_LEVARE

Investigate and Unveil Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum

Chiara Rotondi

«Whitney Museum, what do you would to be?»¹

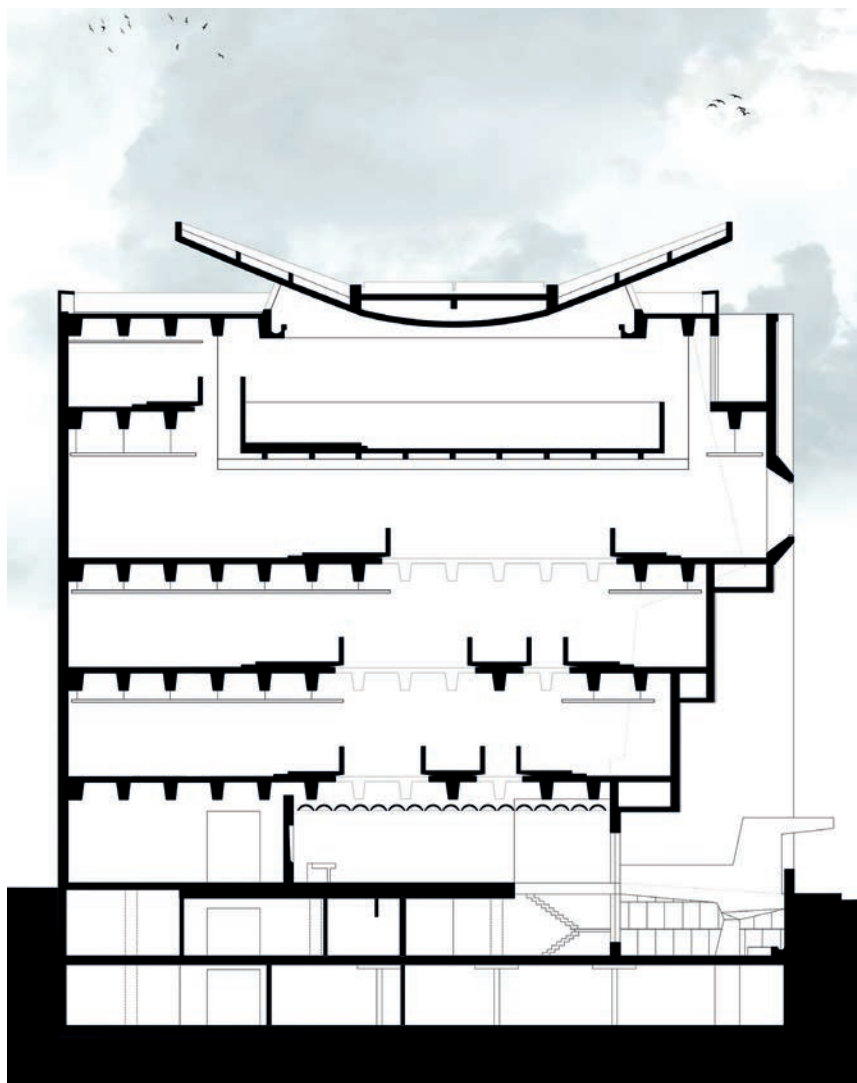
This seems to be the question from which the workshop Formal Manipulations started. The subject is the iconic Marcel Breuer's museum of modern and contemporary art in New York. This building is now disused, leaving a huge void of full and wise architecture. The lens of exploration that has been proposed is an attitude of analysis defined "close-reading": it means a careful reading of all the elements that in fact constitute an object, allowing a meaningful understanding.

The operation of manipulation started from a first phase of approach: understanding the formal and spatial aspects of the building. They are key elements for a critical study development. Then, the second phase allowed to define an operative strategy: indicating topics and tools through which start to manipulate and alter the space.

The Italian word «ri-levare»² has been useful to reason on a double track: on the one hand the in-depth study of the existing condition of the building, on the other the instinctive intention to reveal its hidden qualities. Etymologically, the term is used both to indicate an operation of investigation and dimensional verification, and to propose an act of removal, a subtraction.

«One may say that architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces. (...) An architectural space must reveal the evidence of its making by the space itself»³. And it is for such reason the process of manipulation beginning just from the encounter with the interior space, enclosed by the inviolable shell that distinguishes the formal aspects of this architecture; the peculiarity that has defined it in the collective imaginary. Massive and sculptural, the museum makes impossible the intuition of its interior; it stands compact externally without giving any trace of its soul.

Therefore, the section is revealing. It investigates the space vertically and manifests a further and important element of this architecture: the interiors. They reveal the coincidence of the container with its contents, information



2. C. Rotondi, *Ri_levare*, section, 2019

even more evident if we realize a model of the empty space, like the negative matrix models of Luigi Moretti's studies⁴.

«This story if told from realization of form would make»⁵ the prefabricated concrete slabs that defining the floors of the exhibition halls «more expressive

of the force»⁶. They allow to have the space free from further structural elements and by collaborating with the outer casing, make a solid structure. To reveal and clarify this aspect, an operation of removal allows to perceive its real figuration through cuts of light that connect the various levels of the building.

A final operation concluded this critical investigation, inspired by a common theme in Breuer's architecture: the suspension. We can think of the significant overhang of the *Breuer House* in New Canaan; or the small-scale experiments, such as the *Cesca* and the *Wassily* chairs; just to mention a few examples. The manipulation has gone as far as to propose a peculiar "top room", between the roof and the sky. A suspended space, hanging up from the slab structure, which reveals its presence outside only through the light wings of a curved cover that wants to capture the light.

«This is how the programme started. (...) From all I have said I do not mean to imply a system of thought and work leading to realization from Form to Design. Designs could just as well lead to realizations in Form. This interplay is the constant excitement of Architecture»⁷.

Note

1. The phrase refers to the writings of Louis I. Kahn. The project elaborated for this workshop is based on a method suggested by an essay by the architect: "Form end Design" in Scully Jr. V., *Louis I. Kahn: makers of Contemporary Architecture*, New York, Braziller 1962, pp. 114-121. For this reason, in this essay there are several quotes which have been crucial for this experiment of "critical thinking".

2. As it is explained in the essay, the title lays on a double meaning of the Italian word: *rilevare*. "*Rilevare*" refers to the operation of geometry survey of a building. Instead "*ri-levare*" is used when something is removed from somewhere. Etymologically, the term indicates an act of lifting, which recall the idea of reveal something. For this reason, the subtitle explains the concept with the verbs "investigate" and "unveil".

3. Ivi, p. 11.

4. The reference is related to the architectural models of the interior space proposed by Luigi Moretti in the famous essay "Structures and sequences of spaces". Moretti L., *Strutture e sequenza di spazi*, in «Spazio», n. IV, December 1952-April 1953, pp. 9-20 and 107-108.

5. V. Scully, *Louis I. Kahn...* op. cit., p. 119.

6. Ibidem.

7. Ivi, p. 121.



INSIDE-OUT

Beatrice Conforti
Jacopo Costanzo
Francesca Sibilio
Isabella Zaccagnini



I. Zaccagnini, *The Imperfect Relations of the Primitive Form*, collage, 2019



1. B. Conforti, *Keeping an Eye on the World Going by my Window*, model, 2019

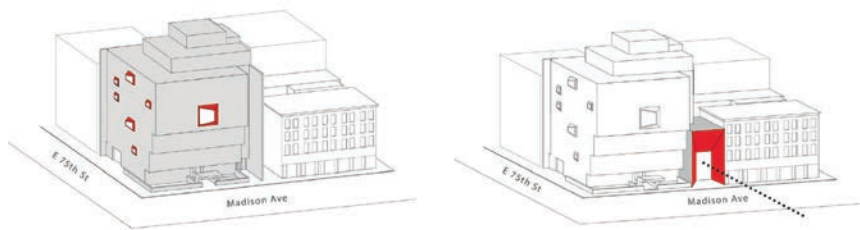
KEEPING AN EYE ON THE WORLD GOING BY MY WINDOW

Beatrice Conforti

«When I wake up early in the morning, lift my head, I'm still yawning (...) Please, don't wake me, no, don't shake me, leave me where I am, I'm only sleeping. Everybody seems to think I'm lazy, I don't mind, I think they're crazy. Running everywhere at such a speed, till they find there's no need (...) Keeping an eye on the world going by my window, I'm taking my time».

The Beatles, *I'm only sleeping*, Revolver, 1966.

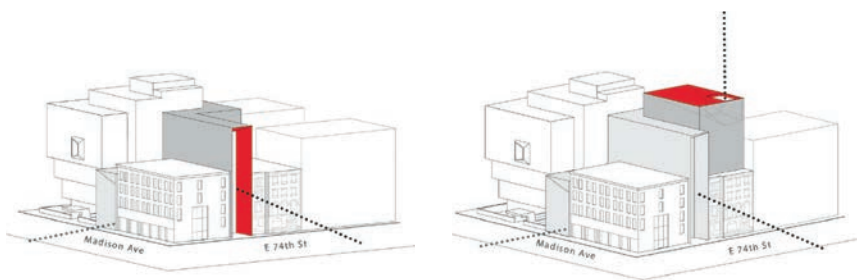
In 1966 the construction of the Whitney Museum was complete; in the same year the Beatles released a song that seems to give a voice to this monolithic and imposing “body”, with small and large eyes that sleepily observe the city. Those openings recall half-closed eyelids: it's no coincidence that Marcel Breuer defined them as *eyebrow windows*¹. He conceived them as directional lenses, witnessing the fast and frenetic world that flows between Madison Avenue and 75th street. This feature of the project, above all the others, attracted my attention for a reinterpretation of the building aimed at manipulating the form. The act of shaping the building character through the accurate design of the window is not an isolated gesture in Breuer's projects. Browsing through his many works, I realized how carefully he drew this element. For the architect, designing the openings often meant inserting fragments of voids in a larger, repetitive system, in a sort of three-dimensional decoration carved into the concrete. This happens exasperatedly in the *9 Cleveland* tower and in the *Weaver Federal Building*. In other buildings such as *Madison Park High School* or the campus of *Saint John's Residence Hall*, Breuer introduced a variation and a slight movement in the façades, thanks to the attention given to lights and shadows. At any rate, Breuer's windows epitomize the relationship between the interior of the building and the landscape, between public and private space. As they influence the composition of the elevation with its



2. B. Conforti, *Keeping an Eye on the World Going by my Window*, axonometries, 2019

set of rules and exceptions, they also have an impact on the way interior spaces are perceived. Comparing the Whitney Museum to the other works mentioned above, one can observe a sort of autonomy between the shape of this element and the overall design of the façade. The *eyebrows* are in fact trapezoidal elements extruded from the walls rather than carved into it. They are protruded slopes, in search of view and light, born from the massive building but independent from it: they look like eyes, eager to observe the city. For a full understanding of this project, I tried to delve into the “anatomy” of these specific elements, retracing some original drawings by Breuer. I soon realized that the windows, as well as framing glimpses of the typical New York buildings, bring into the exhibition rooms a “broken light”, diversified in intensity on the oblique faces of the irregular intrados.

Taking inspiration from Breuer’s design of the existing windows, I tried to “reverse” the concept of these shapes. In my project for the museum extension the new volumes do not protrude like silent observers, but they open up, inviting passer-by to enter. The form of the *eyebrow* is inverted, the new diaphragm elements are splayed in the opposite way. The first new opening, next to the original entrance, resumes the height of the inverted *ziggurat* of the main facade and fits exactly into the space in contact with the pre-existing building. The second opening, overlooking the 74th street, exceeds the height of the pre-existing buildings and creates a full-height space, offering from the inside of the museum a view of the city from all floors of the extension. The third hole is a sky-light window in the

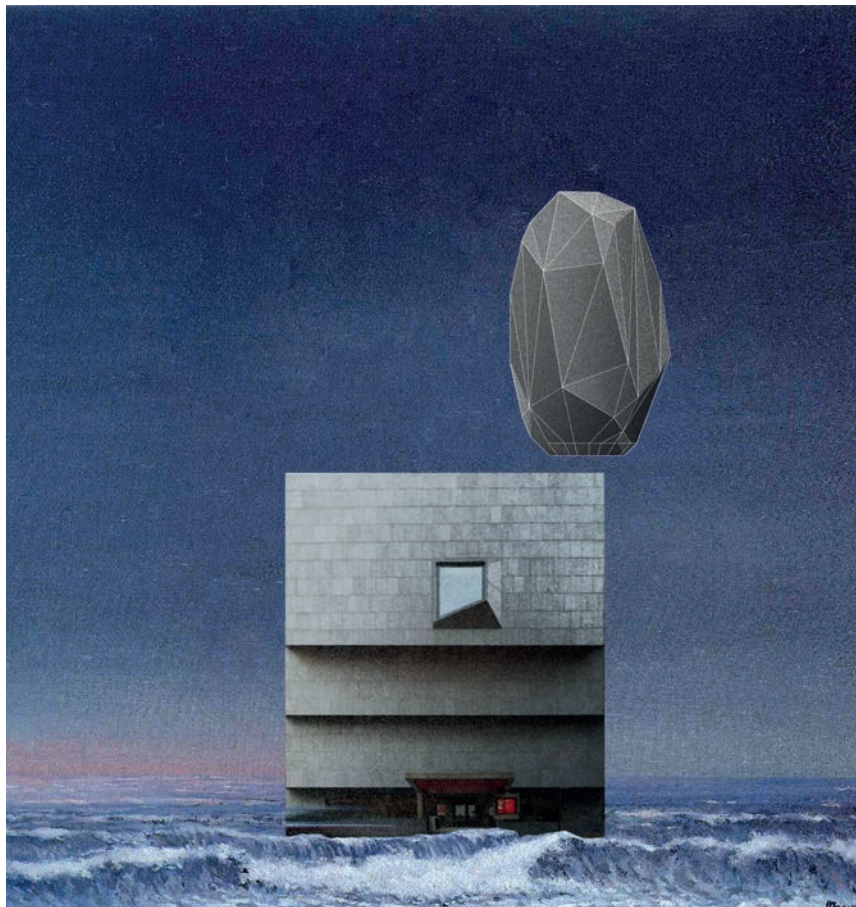


exhibition hall, at the end of the new museum itinerary. It's a well of light that illuminates the space of two different floors. Through those interventions, new spaces are connected to the original building in a direct and simple way: they respect the "hermetic" character of the museum, but their shape is more open towards the city. Conceived as "appendices" sculpted by light, the new volumes strive to catch the light, looking outward, gaining new space outside. The museum extension, however, does not betray the brutalist and material nature of the main building.

The world outside would no longer just be observed through the "curious lenses" of the Whitney Museum's windows. The building "was taking his time" but it cannot continue to sleep, nor remain unused or rarely host to exhibitions and collections. The building is still resting, but a decisive and unchanging awakening of this exceptional architecture by Marcel Breuer should be made possible.

Note

1. See the «Marcel Breuer digital archive»: <https://breuer.syr.edu/>.



1. J. J. Costanzo, *A Meteorite on Top of the Whitney*, collage, 2019

ALL HAVE FAILED

Jacopo Costanzo

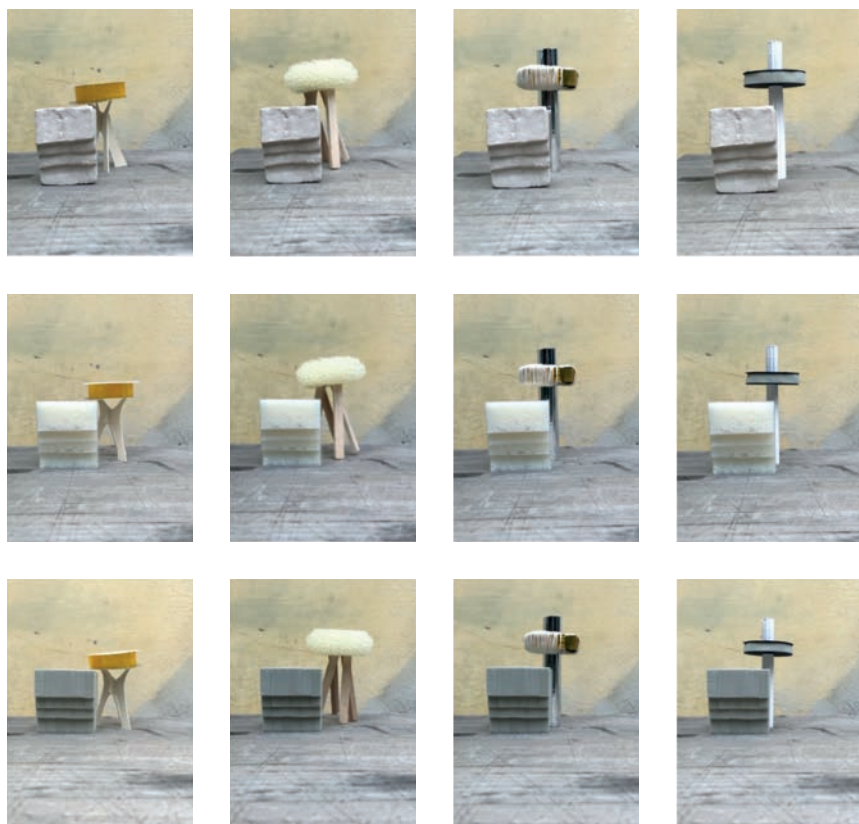
On an iconographic level, the manipulation proposed here is difficult to understand outside a dreamlike, fantastic, surreal realm. Yet this attempt to enlarge, to add — one of the essential features in Breuer's architecture is the addition principle — takes its cue from a genuine and repeatedly repressed desire that the Whitney Museum has always manifested. In fact, from the 1970s until its traumatic relocation to Meatpacking, the museum sought an addition, a continuation, a plausible extension, so to say, through signature architecture designed by such seasoned professionals as Norman Foster, Michael Graves, Rem Koolhaas, Renzo Piano (some of them were sensational proposals, perhaps best and one of the greatest chapters ever planned during their careers, paradigmatic for the evolutions of the architectural strategies between postmodernism, deconstructivism, high-tech). All have failed.

And sadly, the museum never achieved its dream to be expanded. Like the goblin and the mare in Füssli's *The Nightmare*, these projects have remained spirits in darkness, fantastic visions fixed by means of drawings and models — rather than oil on canvas — illusive if strongly present proposals in the imagination of anyone who has studied the museum's history and its failed transformations. Attempting to compensate in some way for this latent tendency of the building designed by Breuer, this regularly interrupted vocation for expansion, the project identifies precisely in the allegorical language often used by Füssli and the symbolic language of Magritte. These are two indispensable tools in the attempt to define a proposal of accomplished manipulation: surreal certainly, at the same time concrete, unquestionably real. The proposal was never interested in a specific formal definition/conclusion of a museum extension but rather attempted to understand this design exercise as the last page of a book: a futuristic novel to virtually decree a ringing of the bell, an end of the games in relation to this

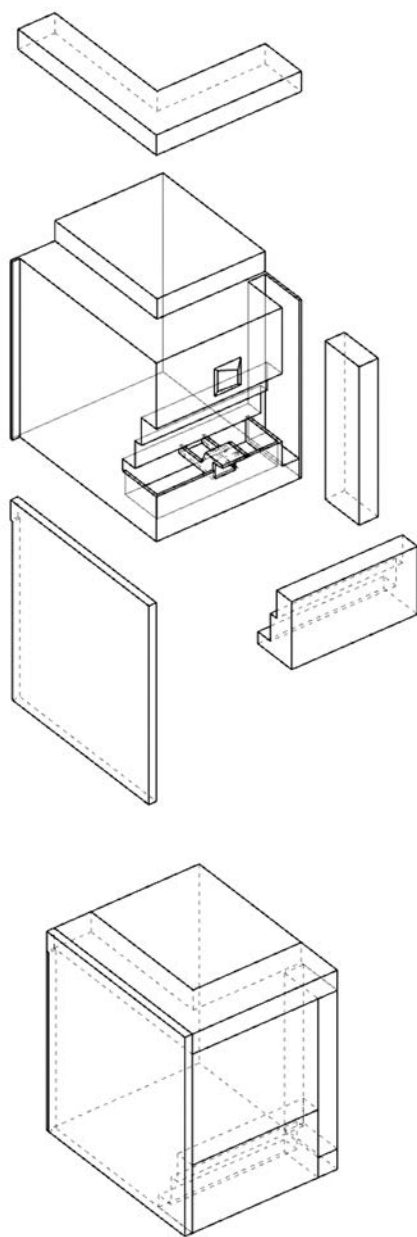
never-ending affair. The Whitney Museum, the work of Marcel Breuer, at least as such, will no longer be allowed to expand.

And exactly therefore it will finally be allowed to expand into its surreal, dreamlike dimension. Here, then, it is the choice to place on the roof of the building, in its skyline, a totemic presence, a menhir, an organic alter ego to Breuer's architecture. This is not done naively or hastily, far from it.

The project, investigated in all its details, places the meteorite in the only corner where it can be put directly in connection with the courtyard behind the museum, hypothesizing a punctual or possibly more articulated ascent system, capable of dividing the access to the new summit space from the flows inside the museum (now Frick Madison). The gravitational relationship between the two volumes, Breuer's scaled monolithic block and the enigmatic menhir placed at the top of it, refers again to pictorial masterpieces by the aforementioned artists. The crouching little monster weighing down on the maiden's chest in Füssli's *The Nightmare*, can be compared to the cloud above the stone in Magritte's masterpiece entitled *Clear Ideas*. It does not matter if the two representations are staged in distinct contexts, a bedroom in half-light and a natural landscape with a romantic flavor, in fact the two horizontal planes on which the protagonists stand, the bed and the sea, have exactly the same value. That is, that of a backdrop from which to bring out the power relations, the nightmares, the obsessions, between the figures in the foreground. If in Füssli the monstrous creature rests avowedly on the maiden, who is in turn tightly clinging to the bed that supports her, in Magritte the two elements do not touch each other, nor do they touch the planes that frame them, the sea and the sky. Gravitational fields, magnetic fields, contacts and detachments, distances and proximities tell different stories, but not quite. Indeed, at this crossroads our project proposal stops. The last line of the last page of this story ends with a question that this project will not answer. Within its tendentious set of operations, must a manipulation necessarily touch the object for it to be altered?



2. J. Costanzo, *A Meteorite on Top of the Whitney*, study models, 2019



1. F. Sibilio, *Outside the "Box"*, axonometry, 2019

OUTSIDE THE “BOX”

Whitney is Sculpture in Itself

Francesca Sibilio

September 1966, 945 Madison Ave, New York, “The Whitney Gala’ Open”.

An out-of-the-box architecture designed by Hungarian architect Marcel Breuer, designed as the home of the Whitney Museum and known worldwide as the Breuer Museum, will occupy the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street.

Architecture presents itself as the scenography of the collective imagination as a theatre of New York social life of the 60s.

It was supposed to deliver a message which the pure form alone could not support; it had to represent, because of its cultural status and the specific historical moment in which it was realized, *a change*.

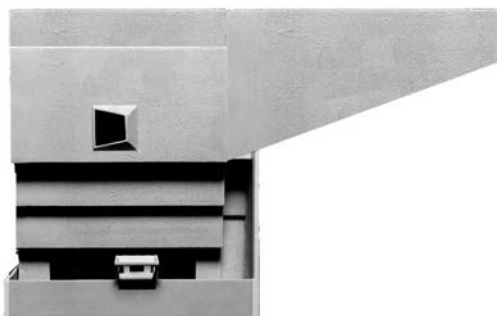
Through the close reading technique this architecture presents itself as a decomposed overlap of infinite layers: social, cultural, architectural, artistic and aesthetic that make way for an infinite series of manipulations¹.

Like a strange cosmic joke, the infinite possibility of readings and manipulations that this building has inherent in itself finds its architectural form as the only obstacle.

In the collective imagination, in fact, this architecture presents itself as anti-dynamic. The design represents the stabilization, the solidification, the stagnation, the cube avoids the need to invent another form, lending itself to new inventions².

As a heavy exercise in semi-brutalism, the Breuer was not a building that communicated well with the nearby skyscrapers of the Upper East Side who were slow to accept a *parvenue* in their midst but despite this it managed to become a powerful symbol of art that sails against the currents of its time.

The architecture of the Breuer: sculptural, meditative and enigmatic, it stands out from the nearby consumerist architecture of New York, the



2. F. Sibilio, *Outside the "Box"*, collages, 2019

house of the Whitney Museum is distinguished in a rebellious way from the now repetitive and well-known expression of New York architecture of the twentieth century, although in an ambiguous way it is still committed to the clarity of structure and function for this reason it is still today the starting point of continuous re-proposals of form.

The visitor is greeted by the building through an entrance bridge, from the latter and from the sidewalk you can observe the submerged courtyard and its sculptures as well as glimpse the atrium and the sculpture gallery, of the level below, through the glass walls.

To emphasize the completeness of the architectural form, the granite facades of both streets are separated from the adjacent front.

While the inverted pyramid of the mass of the building draws attention to the museum and its special dedication to the street front of New York City.

The project, in progress, transforms the building into a unit, an element, a core and gives it a direction towards Madison Avenue. The overall granite cladding, homogeneous, extends towards Madison Avenue, descending into the garden with openings emerging from the surface, with the modulation of the Madison Avenue gap between it and the neighbouring buildings.

Through the insertion of primary architectural forms that tend to emphasize the enigmatic casket of the Breuer Museum, the attempt is to transform the building itself as a sculpture, preserving the *intimate and private* identity.

Note

1. Cfr. Yaneva A., *Modern Architecture as Inextensible. An Actor-Network Theory: Account of Contested Design*, in Joelho. *Journal of architectural culture. Reuse of Modernist Buildings: pedagogy and profession*, vol. 9, 2018, p. 88.
2. Cfr. OMA/Experience in A+U *Architecture and Urbanism* n. 398, 2003.



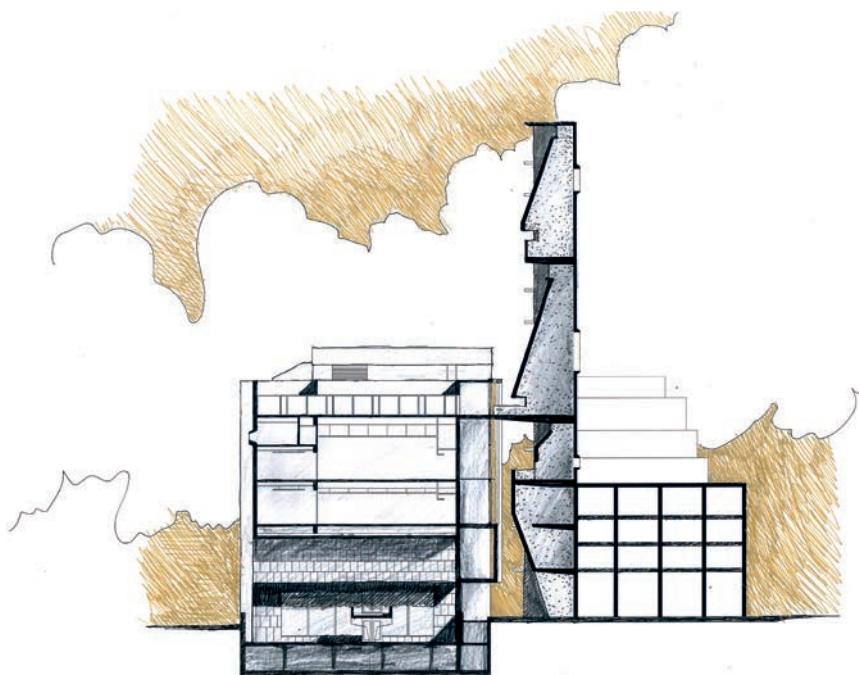
1. I. Zaccagnini, *The Imperfect Relations of the Primitive Form*, model, 2019

THE IMPERFECT RELATIONS OF THE PRIMITIVE FORM

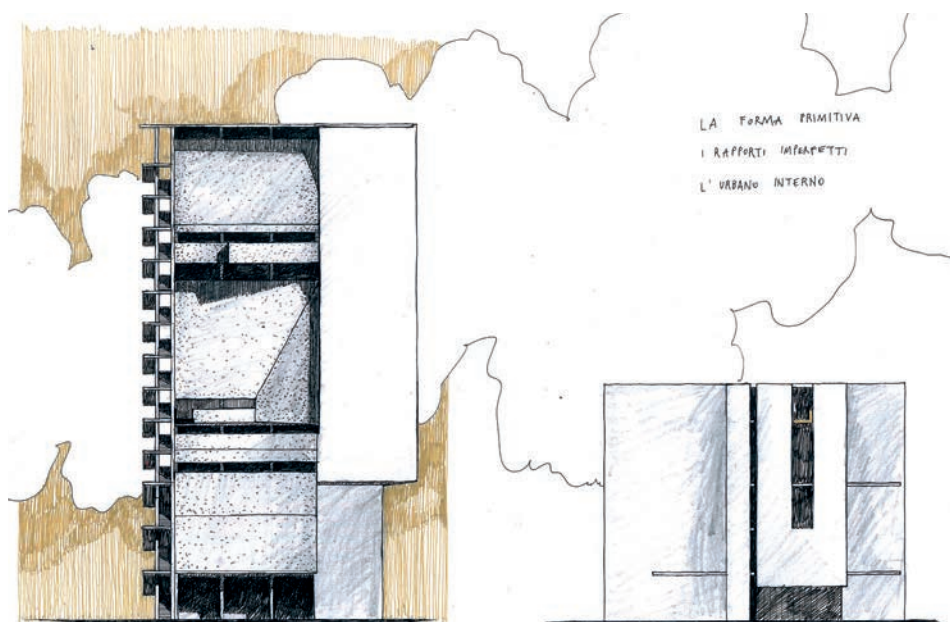
Isabella Zaccagnini

At the intersection of Madison Avenue and 75th Street, an angular point of the rigid New York grid, stands the unusual presence of a building with an absorbent and implosive form. The enigmatic force of Breuer's opera consists into this introverted and monadic nature, which is contemplative and disturbing at the same time. An imaginary that could have found influences in the contemporary discoveries of Mesoamerican art, such as the Mezcala sculptures, which came to light from archaeological excavations of that period. Breuer could have observed it in the Museum of Primitive Art opened in 1957 to New York public. The synthetic form of these archaic sculptures expresses an instinctive closure, an alienation from the environment, which accompanies a sense of emotional implosion and deep loneliness; moreover, the summary of the carving obtained from monolithic stone blocks, brings to light both the rough texture of the material and the immediacy of the incident gesture, including all its explosion of expressive force. Likewise, the corporeity of the museum seems to want to lead us in the same direction: it is monolithic and heavily carved into its surface by a granite coating. In this dialogue with the concreteness of a primitive form, we are estranged from the artifices of conventions, from logical organizations or from social language schemes, and opened to that naïve and irrational freedom proper to the madman, the child, or the artist. The form proposed by Breuer is thus rooted in a temporal value that is neither close nor remote and its primitive and irrational charge opens wide the frenetic and contingent gaze of the town to the eternal magical-symbolic of art.

The stereometric and monadic form gives to the building an apparent alienation from the context, but the decisive architectural choices made by Breuer are anchored precisely to it. The proportions and gestures of the building are in fact thought on a series of imperfect relations, non-canonical, that thicken masses and weights in relation to the context. Not



2. I. Zaccagnini, *The Imperfect Relations of the Primitive Form*, section, 2019



3. I. Zaccagnini, *The Imperfect Relations of the Primitive Form*, elevations, 2019

the golden sections or the Euclidean forms direct the incisive dimensional choices of elevation and plant.

The compressed density of a void facing Madison Avenue breaks the introverted posture of the museum: like an *ancestor* kneeling and reaching out towards the street, the building establishes a relational dialogue with the context and reinforces the suggestions of movement towards the main entrance. The elevation of this void is synthetically resolved either on the proportions of the adjacent facades; moreover, like an echo, it seems to recall in the vitality of the negative the jagged skyline of the buildings around. The use of the void as an attractive and traversable experience is recalled by Breuer both in the suspended entrance threshold of the zoomorphic shelter, and in the solution of the lateral staircase body, which forms a shadow joint between the museum and the buildings next to it. Again, in its careful dialogue, the backward and disjointed volume of the stairs is placed and sized in relation to an opposite presence: in front of the Museum a narrow void space divides two tall buildings and opens towards an urban interior closed to the access from the street. A weave of hidden inner courtyards closed to the passer unexpectedly blooms in the rigid New York fabric.

The close reading for the project proposal looks at these imperfect relations of this apparently monadic form alien to the context, which by retreating into the void opens the opportunities for a public space.

The expansion is located right on the edge between the museum and the adjacent Madison Avenue's buildings. It provides on one hand the demolition of the first particle of the historical fabric bordering the Whitney, opening a void in the urban front; on the other the positioning of a high volume resting on the remaining pre-existence. This sculptural and indigenous counterpoint extends in a vertical relation with the city, acting both as a bell tower of the museum and, with its weight suspended on the street, as a disturbing invitation threshold to enter in the proposed new urban interior. The proposal therefore intends to open a potential beginning to a chain of collected and hidden voids of New York courtyards, marking the opening to a new public space hidden from the street. Lastly, on the south façade of the new volume, the repetition of the iconic windows aims to reward the demolition of the building due to the expansion. In fact, the missing particle, with its large bow-window on the road, was represented in original Breuer's perspectives of the project. It's intended here to hypothesize that it had stimulated more than anything else the imagination of the Master in drawing the iconic cyclopean eye of the museum.

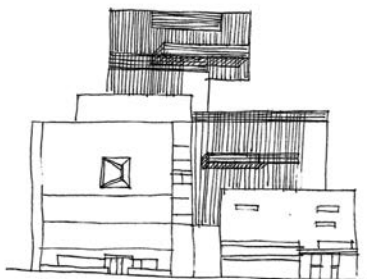
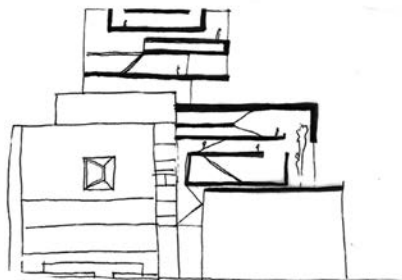
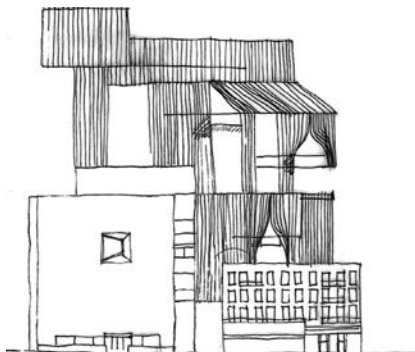


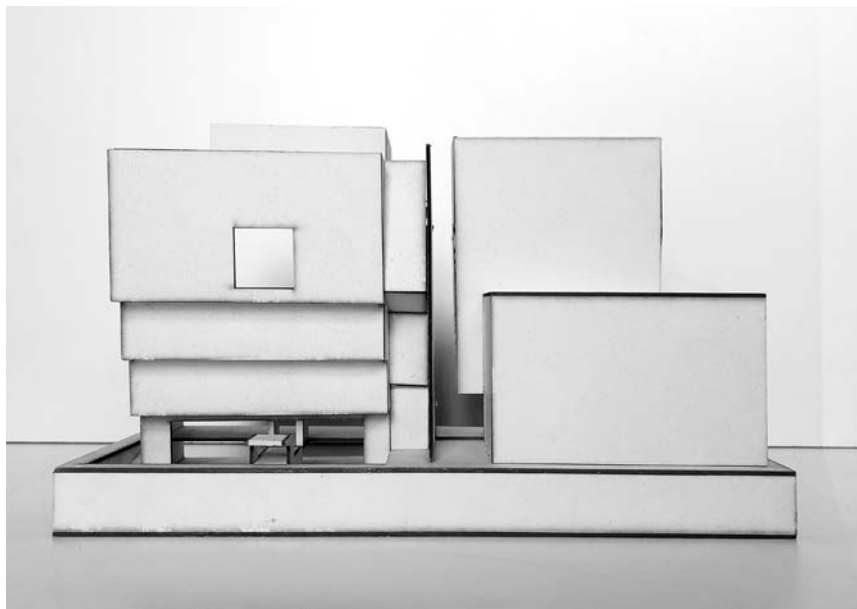
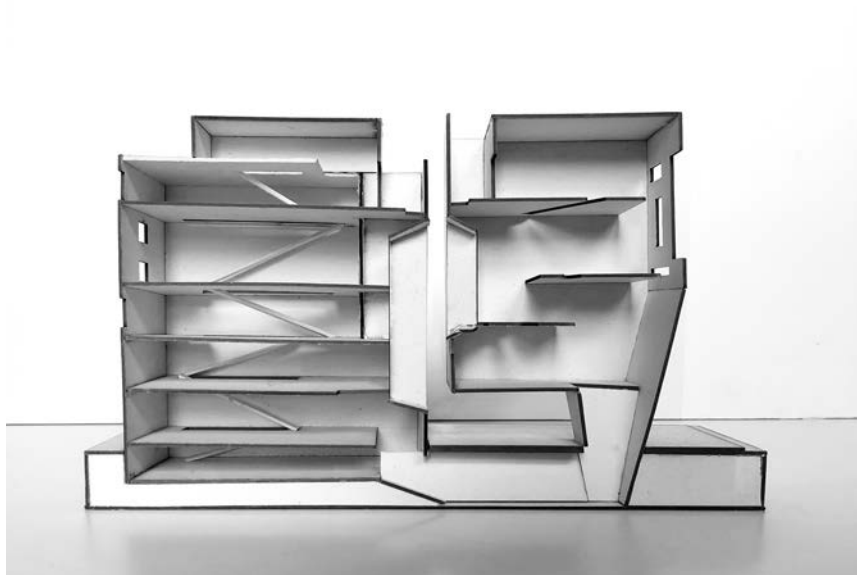
4. I. Zaccagnini, *The Imperfect Relations of the Primitive Form*, perspective sequences, 2019



OUT

Enrica Di Toppa
Simone Leoni
Edoardo Marchese
Claudia Ricciardi





1. E. Di Toppa, *An Open-ed Work*, model, 2019

AN OPEN-ED WORK

Enrica Di Toppa

In 1975, a conical excavation appeared on two buildings under demolition in Paris. The material was violently ripped from the buildings, revealing the conditions of life previously contained by the architectural shell. Here is the work *Conical Intersect* by Gordon Matta-Clark, an act of denunciation and redemption against the dysfunction of the social structure.

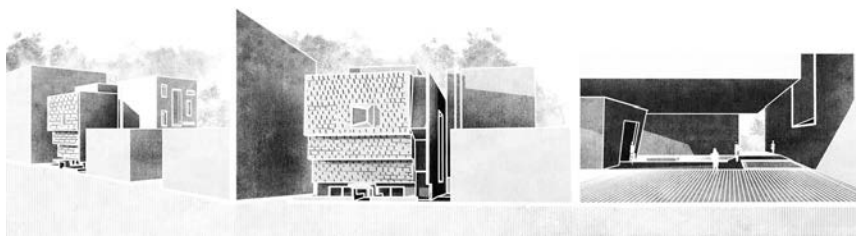
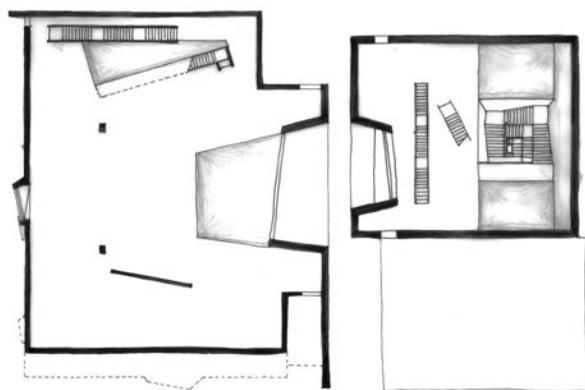
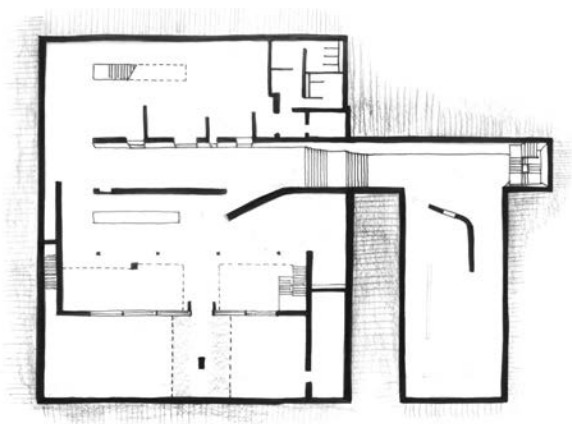
Twenty-six years later, in a conference held at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, Umberto Eco reflects on the condition of the contemporary museum, outlining its development from the container of treasures to the triumph of the container itself. The latter is not even so innovative if we imagine that «the first visitors to the Louvre (...) entered not so much to admire the works of art it contained but to put their foot the first time in that palace closed to the public until then»¹.

Matta-Clark's violence and Eco's observations are two disconnected facts, yet these two suggestions influenced Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum process of manipulating form.

The iconic building appeared in Manhattan in 1966. It was a massive structure, closed toward the outside. At first glance, the museum appears as a stereometric volume with an introverted nature. Observing it more closely, it emerges that the envelope juts out towards the city, almost to underline Breuer's thought: «The real impact of any work is the extent to which it unifies contrasting – the opposite points of view»².

Emptying the Whitney Museum's pure geometry and adding plastic elements underlie the intention to open up the building to the outside. On the one hand, the gradual retreat of the main elevation and the excavation in the ground create a filter space between the entrance hall and the urban fabric, accentuated by a sculptural walkway connecting the museum to the street. On the other hand, the openings protrude from the flat surface of the facades and orient the views depending on the angle they assume.

The analysis of these elements emphasizes the relationship between the



1. E. Di Toppa, *An Open-ed Work*, plans and perspectives, 2019

building and the urban environment, breaking the envelope of the museum (with significantly dissimilar violence to Matta Clark's work) and dissolving the container as an exclusive temple of art.

The juxtaposition of a volume at the Whitney Museum allowed us to investigate the relationship that the building establishes with the surrounding. A subterranean link connects the basement to the new building, enabling users to head to the adjoining areas. This operation redefines the vertical circulation system, associating it with an alternative path that violates the volume of the container and connects it to new spatial and functional realms. The insertion of cuts and cracks in existing floors as decompression devices accommodate staircases that, freed from the core of services, expand the interior space and interrupt the vertical development of floors.

Following the logic of «the opposite points of view»³, the image of the Whitney Museum remains virtually unchanged. Only close up you can catch a glimpse of the cut in the side facade. The latter communicates with the hole that marks the elevation of the new volume, visually relating the interiors of the two buildings. The two openings correspond to the double and triple heights that characterize the structures, hollowing out the space and making the void volumetric.

The manipulation of the Whitney Museum stems from the interpretation of the relationship between interior and exterior in Breuer's architecture. But as such, the manipulation claims to exaggerate this theme and its potential. Borrowing Eco's words, we could say: «If the utopia I have outlined seems unattainable to you, rest assured. I entitled my lecture to the museum of the third millennium, and before this millennium ends, there are still 999 years»⁴.

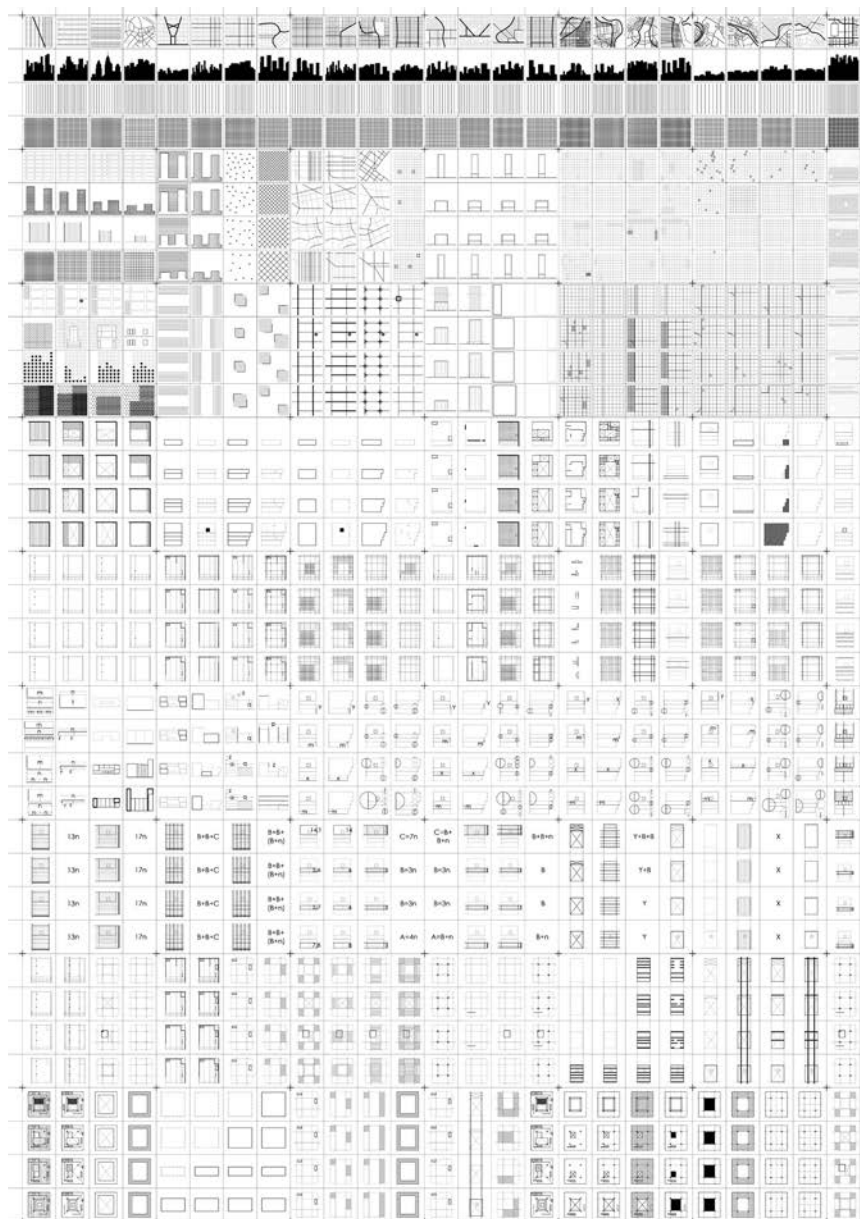
Note

1. «The first visitors to the Louvre (...) would enter (...) not so much to admire the works of art it contained but to set foot for the first time in that palace hitherto closed to the people», in Eco U., *Il Museo nel Terzo Millennio*, Conference held at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao on June 25 th, 2001. Translated in english by the author.

2. Breuer M., *Sun and Shadows*, in Blake P. (ed.), *Marcel Breuer: Sun and Shadows. The Philosophy of an Architect*, Longmans, Green and Co, London 1956, p. 32.

3. Ibidem.

4. «If the Utopia I have outlined seems unattainable to you, be calm. I titled my talk at the museum of the third millennium, and before this millennium ends, it still takes 999 years», in Eco U., *Il Museo nel Terzo Millennio*, op. cit.



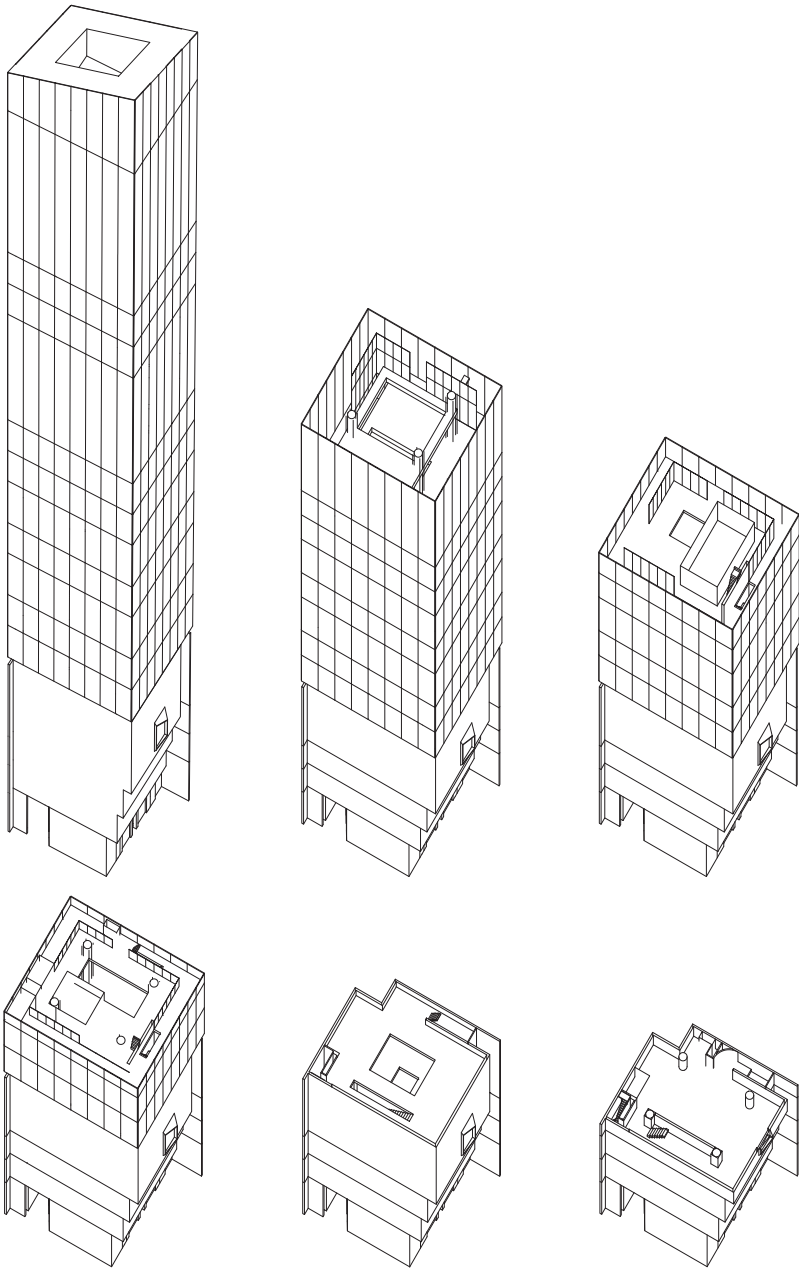
1. S. Leoni, *Close Reading, Regola and Contrasto*, Tavola sinottica di operazioni analitiche elementari, 2019.

CLOSE READING, *REGOLA* AND *CONTRASTO*

Simone Leoni

Close reading is an analytical-critical reading operation through which an artifact is studied by means of redesign, a fundamental active-passive operation, with the aim of attaining a thorough understanding of it¹. Nothing unusual, if we think that already Alberti wrote: «all the buildings of antiquity that might have importance for some respect, I have examined them, in order to derive useful elements from them»².

The *Tavola sinottica di operazioni analitiche elementari* collects operations of ideogrammatic analysis, made possible at the end of careful redesign, grouped into quadrants, totalling $28 \times 4 \times 9 = 1.008$ ideograms that summarize a preliminary form of necessary knowledge of the artifact. The surveys are mainly analytical or comparative. At the urban scale (ideograms in rows 1-4), a comparison was conducted between New York City and other cities, comparing their urban profile, verticality ratio, and fabric density. At the neighbourhood scale (rows 4-8), a comparison was conducted between the major macro-areas of downtown New York (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens and Harlem) by analyzing urban plans, profiles, verticality ratios, fabric density, perceptions of horizontality and verticality, and perceptions of dilation and compression. At the Madison Avenue scale (rows 9-12), urban-architectural features were investigated by analyzing urban streetscapes, exterior-interior relationships of buildings, green areas and their conformation. At the architectural scale, the analysis is characterized by three levels of interpretation: *morfé* (rows 13-16), “form”, on morphological-compositional aspects, such as the composition of plans, elevations, sections, spatial sequences, masses, voids, perforations, geometries, materials; the *tektoniké* (rows 17-20), “tectonics”, on technological-structural aspects, such as the arrangement in plans, elevations and sections of pillars, beams, floors, cantilevers, one-way decks, two-way decks, stiffening cores; the *métro*n (rows 21-24), “metrics”, on dimensional and modular aspects, such as modules, measures, ratios, axes, dimensions and proportions. In the diagrams in rows 25-28, it also emerges how the four



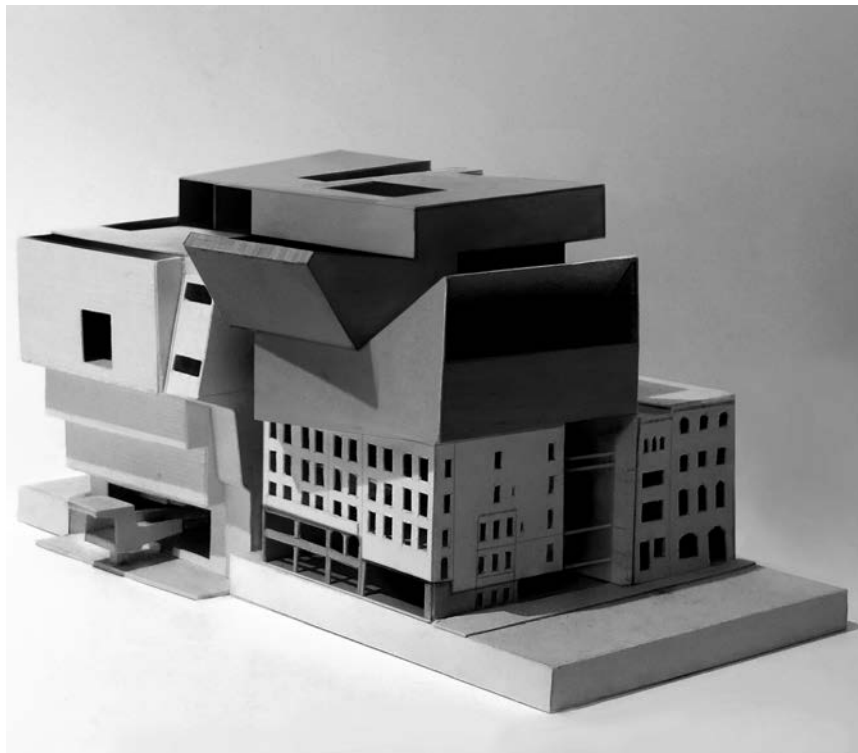
2. S. Leoni, *Close Reading, Regola and Contrasto*, axonometries, 2019

levels from bottom to top measure, vertically, $8m - 6m - 6m - 14m$, while the base of the building is $26m$. By identifying a modulus n of $2m$, the maximum common divisor among the values found, an elementary proportional system is developed whereby: first level, $A = 4n$, second and third levels, $B = 3n$, fourth level, $C = 7n$ which, similarly, can be written as $A = B + n$, $B = B$, $C = B + B + n$. Such a growth pattern can then encode an expansion law, in the vertical direction, where the Whitney Museum (as a whole) measures Y and whose growth becomes of the type Y , $Y + Y$, $Y + Y + B$, $Y + Y + B$ and so on. Modularity and measurement, a pivotal element of Manhattan's growth mechanism, becomes a proper character of the building's composition.

On the canonical construction of a tripartite building in *attacco a terra*, *corpo di fabbrica*, and *attacco al cielo*, the *Tavola Sinottica* shows how the compact nature of the Whitney Museum becomes an ideal foundation for a skyward momentum. From here arise the two aspects that will give a logical construction to the proposed development: the *regola* (the rule), and the *contrasto* (the contrast). By *regola* is meant the intention to want to build a system of logical, geometric, dimensional and spatial relationships between the existing building and the proposed expansion. The logical proceeding by *contrasto*, having established the system of rules through which to develop the extension (compare to analysis), centers on operations conducted on several levels: first, a "material" type of *contrasto*, on the opaque-translucent opposition: the more the heavy basement will be opaque, massive and cohesive, the more the new element will be light, airy and translucent; second, a "spatial" type of *contrasto*, whereby the closed and compartmentalized spaces of the existing building spill over into a free system of planes in space, moving from a continuous sequence of concluded spaces to a free sequence of open spaces; third, a "tectonic" type of *contrasto*, whereby the logic of a concealed structure is reversed into a manifest tectonic one: four large pylons become the prevailing load-bearing element on which to install the two new prevailing types of decking. A first, standard type houses the suspended floors of the extension, and a second type, consisting of a three-dimensional lattice system that works in tension from above and overturns the canonical system of weight distribution.

Note

1. Cfr. Eisenman P., *Ten Canonical buildings: 1950-2000*, Rizzoli International, New York, 2008.
2. Alberti L. B., *L'Architettura*, Libro VI, I, Florence 1485, Italian translation by G. Orlandi, 1966, Il Polifilo, Milan 1989, p. 232



1. E. Marchese, *Harmonic Dissonances*, model, 2019

HARMONIC DISSONANCES

Edoardo Marchese

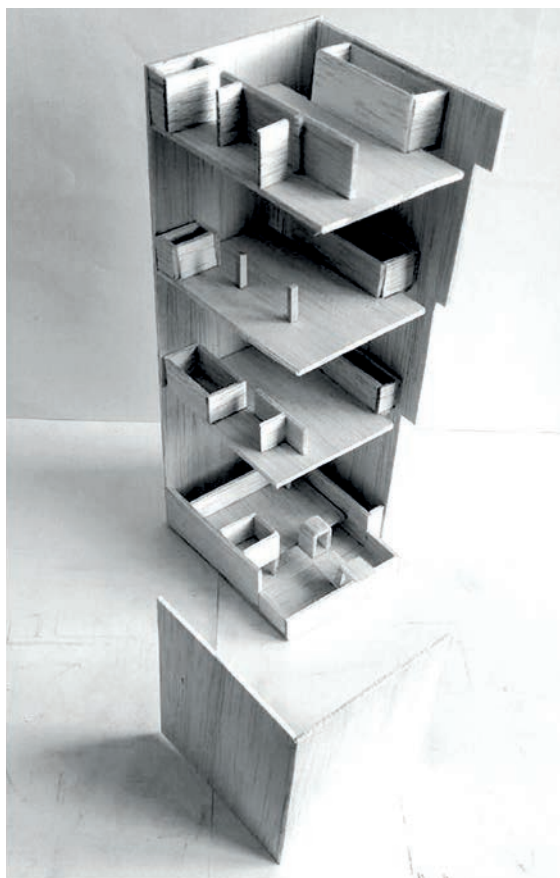
Composing by Contrasts

«The real impact of any work is the extent to which it unifies contrasting notions – the opposite points of view. *I mean unifies and not compromises*»¹.

These words by Breuer point to a compositional interest towards contrasts which is echoed in the design of the Whitney Museum, beginning with its structure: beams and pillars along with load-bearing walls. The inter-floors are compressed, evoking a domestic spatiality, in opposition to the public vocation of the building. The contrast between interior and exterior is vivid, and the museum appears as a hermetic box closed to the city. From the outside, the building is pierced by a compendium of holes rather than a system of coherent openings. Breuer has been often emphasizing that the composition cannot only have formal reasons since «the experience of architecture is received by the whole body, by all our senses – including our sense of logic. It is not only an eye aesthetic, it is a *physical aesthetic*»². The *physical aesthetic* combines logic and experience by expressing itself through great compositional contrasts.

Two Elusive Themes

In analysing this building, two compositional themes emerged that were little developed, almost eluded, by the German architect: the vertical communication of spaces and the use of natural light. The only double-height space is the external area before the hall. The holes are treated as hypertrophic outgrowths, useful to characterise the volumetry of the façades and not to bring in natural light. The outside is visible only from two openings. These two themes seem to be left dormant by Breuer, and they deserve to be explored by a critical rewriting looking «for a definite,



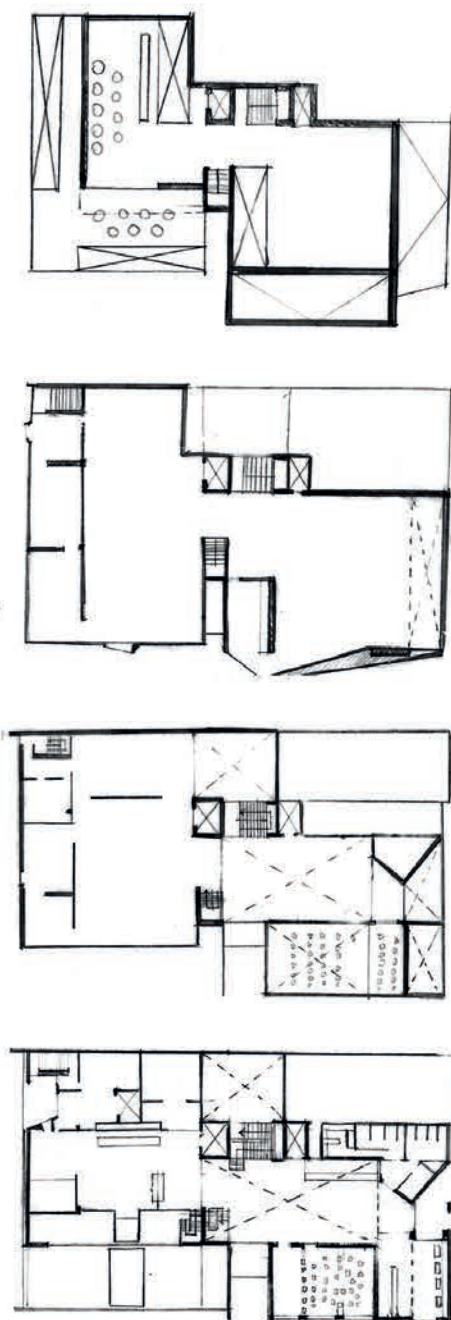
2. E. Marchese, *Harmonic Dissonances*, model, 2019

clear answer that satisfies opposite aims and need is what takes architecture out of the realm of abstraction and gives it life and art»³.

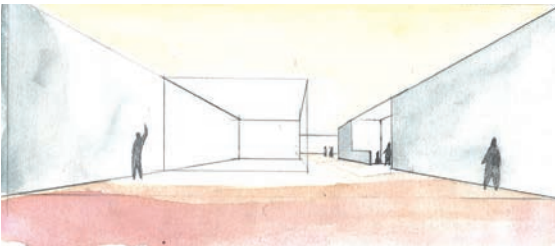
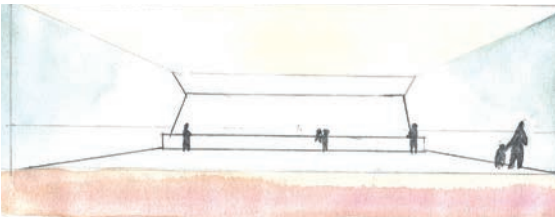
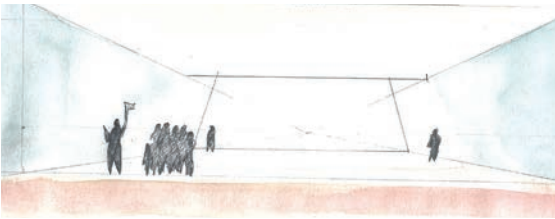
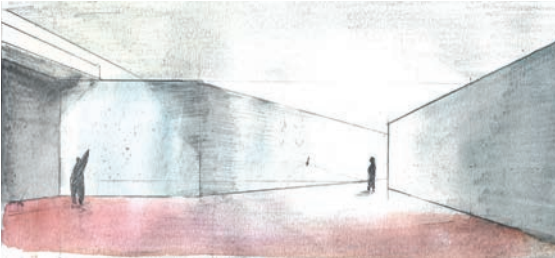
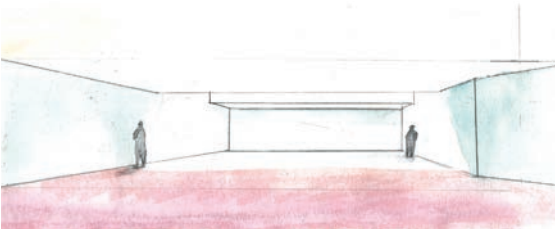
In Search for a *Vital Balance*

The extension proposed here considers the Whitney Museum as an irreducible material and respects its floor plans and elevations. The levels are extended, supporting the horizontal crossing of space. At the same time, an intervention is made where Breuer left compositional margin looking for verticality and natural light. The design breaks the rigid overlapping

3. E. Marchese, *Harmonic Dissonances*, plans, 2019



4. E. Marchese, *Harmonic Dissonances*, perspective sequences, 2019



of the same plan by introducing vertical gaps. A further compositional operation consists of the modulation of natural light, which is differently manipulated by the architecture at every level depending on various uses of interior spaces. The result is inspired by the three founding impulses that, according to Breuer, positively marked the Modern Movement. They can all be found in his architecture. The first impulse represents an absence of prejudice against what is already there and what potentially has a value to be preserved. In Whitney's case, the building itself is recognised as a value to be protected. The second impulse requires that the modern architect directly and objectively addresses issues in their practical scope. According to this principle, the functional programme and the indications of the competition for the extension were respected, being considered as compositional inputs rather than limitations. The third principle is more abstract and is related to architectural composition.

«The third dominant impulse of the Modern Movement: the relation of unbroken elements to one another — contrast. What is aimed at in *un*-schematic design. (...) These elements receive different forms as a natural consequence of their different structure. Their complete individuality is intended to establish a kind of balance which seems to me far more vital one than the purely superficial “harmony” which can be realized by adopting either a formal or a structural common denominator»⁴.

This project for the extension sought the vital balance found in the third impulse through calibrated dissonances to the pre-existing building. It operates as a measured yet non-emulative intervention, which is modern in its principles and contemporary in its spaces.

Note

1. Breuer M., *Sun and Shadow*, in Blake P. (ed.) *Marcel Breuer: sun and shadow. The philosophy of an architect* Longmans, Green and co LTD. London, 1956, p. 32.
2. Breuer M., *The art of space*, in Blake P. (ed.) *Marcel Breuer...* op. cit., 1956, p. 64.
3. Breuer M., *Sun and Shadow*, in Blake P. (ed.) *Marcel Breuer...* op. cit., 1956, p. 35.
4. Breuer M., *Lecture in Zurich, 1934 “Where do we stand?”*, in Blake P. (ed.), *Marcel Breuer Architect and designer*, Architectural Record book with MOMA print, New York, 1949, p. 122.



1. C. Ricciardi, *The Whitney's Paradox*, model, 2019

THE WHITNEY'S PARADOX

or on the Controversial Form of Whitney Museum
in the Space of Critical Relations

Claudia Ricciardi

The city of New York, conformed by a doctrine of congestion and expression of the fantastic that Koolhaas defines as *Manhattanism*¹, is a peculiar urban condition in which to intervene. Presenting the project for the Whitney Museum, in fact, Marcel Breuer, a leading exponent of the Bauhaus, wonders what a museum and, more specifically, a museum in Manhattan should represent and how it should stand to the New York context². The controversial³ Whitney, placed in multitude of exhibition epicentres (the Met, the MOMA and the Guggenheim), was inaugurated in 1966 in general dissent: an apparently impenetrable fortress different from commercial windows and shimmering skyscrapers.

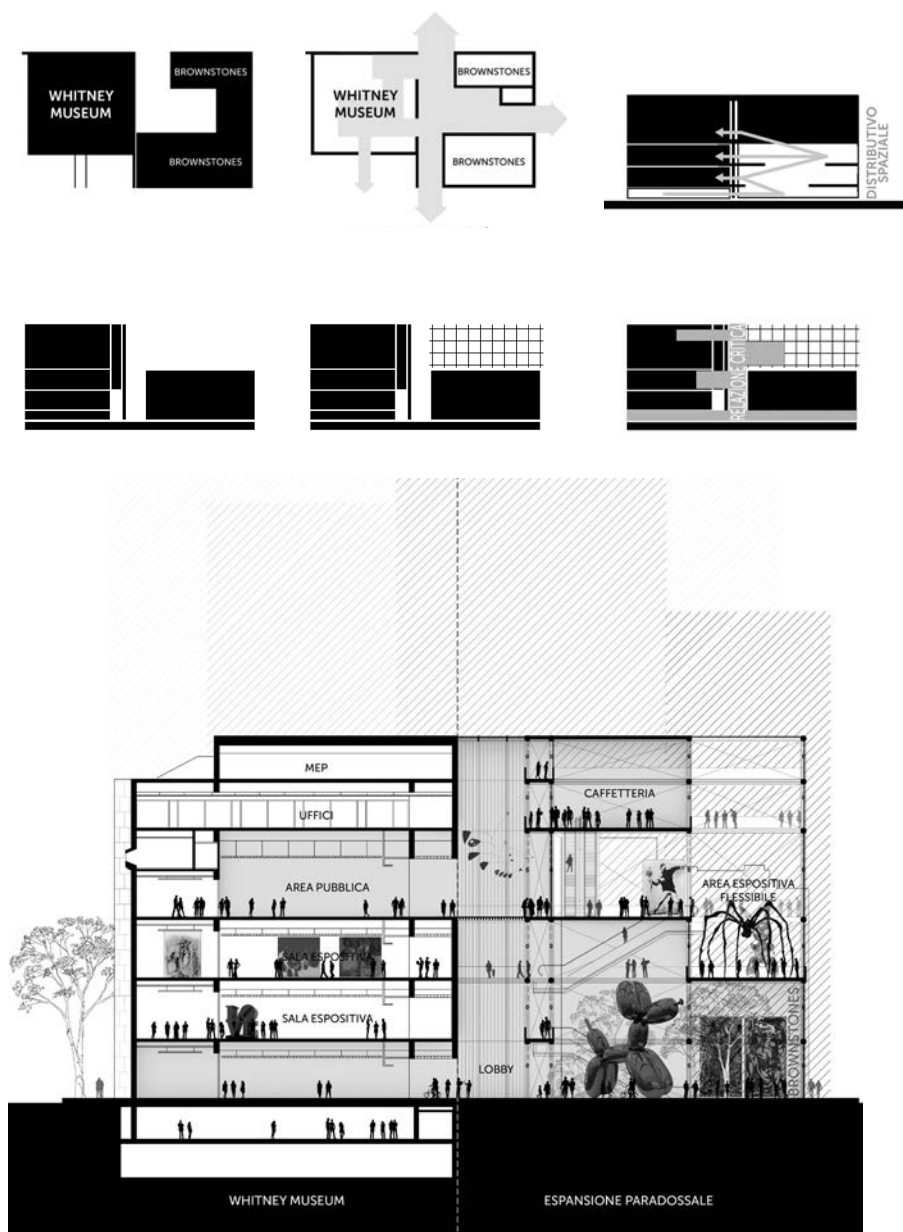
The *close reading* of the building helps to identify its main parts and their relationship, tracing a range of attempts and evolutions. Marcel Breuer works on a deliberately sensitive balance between contrasts and antithetical relationships that avoid simple dichotomies, revealing tense relationships between the parties that manage not to bore, to surprise in an almost paradoxical way.

The *substantial* of the Whitney Museum is moved on top in the form of an inverted ziggurat, in a process of subtraction that reduces the ground floor to a foothold resting discreetly on the ground and supporting the heavy upper volume.

The setback gives the zero level back to the city, opening into an entrance plastically extended into a crossing suspended over a sculpture garden, excavated in the basement. The lower levels are configured as singularities from the organism, open to a spatial articulation that allows to perceive the spaces, in contrast with the strictly overlapping exhibition levels.

Although the museum is configured as an introverted fortress that hides its treasure from the outside, the thick envelope is pierced by a set of openings that offer privileged observation points over the city.

The idea of *formal manipulation* follows the *close reading* of the building,



2. C. Ricciardi, *The Whitney's Paradox*, diagrams and section, 2019

re-proposing its compositional process for contrasts and suggesting an extension grafted into a relationship of balanced dissonances. A paradoxical juxtaposition intended as “strange and unexpected” which combines the emptiness with the heavy volume, the rigid organization of exhibition levels with flexible and indeterminate areas, the introverted fortress with a communicative facade.

The new extension occupies the empty space of the adjacent lot that becomes space for *critical relationships*, touching the ground through a punctual structure that marks and rhythms the spaces. A spatial distributive system connects the exhibition areas by dynamically crossing the space. The distributive system encourages wandering and getting lost in the exhibition spaces, with an uninterrupted view of the city.

The new exhibition space, articulated in the critical distance between Whitney and the brownfields, outlines a space of reaction and relationship between the two interfaces, allowing to grasp their ambivalence and revealing a game of cross-references and dissonances. A paradoxical combination that critically reinterprets the balance of contrasts on which the Whitney Museum is strengthened in a suggestive way.

Note

1. Koolhaas R., *Delirious New York. Un manifesto retroattivo per Manhattan*, Mondadori Electa, Milano e Roma, edizione 27 Feb. 2001.
2. «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?», (in Papachristou T., *Marcel Breuer: New Buildings and Projects*, pp. 14-15).
3. «(...) I would like to suggest that controversy is precisely what a museum should arouse. Any museum of art that does not, somehow, shake up the neighborhood is at least a partial failure. Whatever else Breuer's museum may do to its neighbors, it will never bore them», (in Blake P., *How the Museum Works*, in A.i.A., September-October, 1966).



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THE UNEXTENDIBLE WHITNEY

Albena Yaneva*

Unlike many buildings that are simply ignored, never arise public attention or cause disputes and controversies, the fate that befell the Whitney Museum of American Art is one marked by controversies. The building caught the attention of the public and caused disagreements since the very beginning of its “social life”¹. Founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1930 with the aim of emphasizing the work of living American artists, the Whitney first opened its doors to the public in 1931 in four brownstones at 10 West 8th Street in New York. The museum was discussed again and again over the decades that followed. Discussions regarding the Whitney’s design were especially prevalent in three different periods.

The first big controversy was in the 1960s, when the museum acquired its current building designed by the Bauhaus-trained architect Marcel Breuer together with Hamilton Smith. Many astonished and scandalized New Yorkers who followed the museum’s construction disliked it as soon as it was raised at the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street in Manhattan. They considered it to be too strong a “modernist statement” in a neighbourhood of traditional limestone, brownstone and post-war apartment buildings. There was a striking discrepancy between what was seen on design plans, drawings and models and what was seen further on, when the building was constructed on the site. As the building took shape, public opinion about it changed and the public (citizens, community, architects, professional critics, politicians) began to reappraise it, with some positive opinions shifting to the negative and vice versa. Regarded as sombre, heavy, and even brutal at the time of its completion in 1966, “an inverted Babylonian ziggurat” entirely disparaged by the public in the early years, the Breuer building was later recognized as daring, strong, and innovative.

The second vigorous controversy was triggered by Whitney’s re-design plans. They began shortly after the building was erected in 1966: the museum had only ten years of projected growth, which was quickly reached. It was

not able any longer to provide the necessary design flexibility of the internal display, space was judged to be insufficient; curators and artists expressed their concern that in order to design a new exhibition they often had to work against the system of the building. A possible expansion was discussed in 1978; a year later, in 1979, the commission for a first extension was awarded to Derek Walker Associates and Foster Associates. From this moment on “expansion” became the key word in the Whitney’s architectural history, and the museum was drawn into a long course of extension trials launched officially in the 1980s with the commissioning of Michael Graves.

When Graves presented his plans they were widely debated over the course of the following decade (1981-9). At the time – when architectural criticism was born in the US – it was so rare to have an opinion on a building expressed in the press that it almost did not matter if buildings were considered good or bad; what mattered more was that they were being discussed at all. Graves made three succeeding design proposals. These proposals sparked controversy since they aimed to demolish the adjacent brownstones. Because of this they had to have the approval of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the City Planning Commission and the Board of Estimate. Graves presented his first extension plan in 1985 and was then led to rescaling and redesigning the proposal in 1987 (the second proposal); his third extension proposal – the last attempt to scale down the building – was turned down in 1989.

In 2001, a new architect, the Prizker prize laureate Rem Koolhaas, was commissioned to design the long-awaited extension. Entrusting the museum’s future to the cutting edge of architectural excellence, the Whitney Board was convinced that the Koolhaas project for a NEWhitney “will raise New York architecture to a level that hasn’t been seen since the 1960s”. In the period 2001-4 Koolhaas developed two different design schemes, which were subsequently presented to the Board of Trustees of the Whitney Museum. The first – scheme A – had a long “life” in the office, and although the project was never made public, it travelled widely and was discussed among a variety of participants involved in the design of the NEWhitney: engineers, cost evaluators, stage designers, representatives of the city authorities, the Landmarks Commission, the City Planning Commission, architects and museum professionals. Considered thrilling but expensive, scheme A returned to the Koolhaas office and had to answer a “siren’s call for pragmatism”: it was scaled down to fit a smaller budget. Later, scheme B – which was derived from a new configuration of the site’s

and client's parameters – was designed, presented, evaluated, cost-estimated, and finally considered as inappropriate – and turned down².

Although none of the design schemes of Koolhaas was made public, museum staff, artists, members of the Board of Trustees studied the extension for months in the form of models and plans, giving critiques, adding up new concerns and making demands. Members of the City Planning Commission, the Zoning and the Landmarks engaged in evaluation procedures, imposing still further requirements on the architectural process. During the design period, a lot of plans, architectural drawings, maps, models, renderings and collages were produced; they circulated in the office, and travelled many times to Ove Arup in London to meet mechanical and structural engineers; to California to be evaluated and cost-estimated by value engineers from the company DCI; and to New York to be discussed and assessed by the museum Board of Trustees. Packed in big boxes, stamped and insured, the Whitney models crossed many national frontiers. They have been present simultaneously in numerous offices, have been laid out on so many tables of models, and have been judged, disagreed over and esteemed by many different people. That is how a not-yet-constructed building, a project, gained a degree of reality, and after multiple heated debates, was turned down. Yet, the Whitney story did not end here. Little more than a year after Koolhaas's scheme B was declined, The Whitney Board has started the process again. The Italian architect Renzo Piano had been hired after a six-month search by the Whitney's architect selection committee to design the expansion. His plan was considered as far more modest in size and scale than the proposal of Koolhaas, defined as ambitious and expensive. One of the main requirements discussed in the press as soon as the Whitney Board announced the selection of the new Whitney architect, was to design an extension that will not compete with the Breuer building. Piano's initial design proposal figured a 178-foot-tall building that would rise behind the historic brownstones on Madison between 74th and 75th Streets and connect to the museum's original 1966 Marcel Breuer structure with a series of glass bridges. Preservation groups opposed fiercely the expansion plans with the angriest objections focusing on the move to demolish two brownstones next to the museum on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to make way for the new entrance. From the other side, a well-organized contingent of artists, architects and museum directors supported the expansion and countered the arguments of preservationists and neighbours. Piano's expansion plan aroused also considerable opposition among East Side neighbourhood residents, which escalated after the building expansion has

been approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission and by the Upper East Side Community Board in January 2006. In July 2006 the Whitney Trustees began reconsidering their decision to proceed with the Piano project and the addition as they feared that this project might not get the museum sufficient additional space for the money. This was the third time that the Whitney Museum has commissioned a celebrity architect (after Michael Graves and Rem Koolhaas) to design a major expansion to its landmark building, and his design plans were highly controversial, and subsequently dismissed. Meanwhile the Museum started to discuss the possibility of opening a more modest satellite in a downtown location a site in the Meatpacking District at the foot of the High Line – where the Whitney could have larger-scale exhibition spaces than a Madison Avenue addition. In May 2008, the Whitney Museum released detailed plans to add a second Whitney Museum site to the cultural and civic landscape of New York City with the construction of a new, six-floor, building in the Meatpacking District. Piano was commissioned to work on a different proposal; the idea of addition was entirely abandoned. The museum closed in October 2014 to relocate to the current building at 99 Gansevoort Street. The new Piano-designed building opened doors on May 1, 2015.

What can we make of this story of endless attempts to extend a Modernist icon? Why did so many extension proposals happened to be dismissed? Why did none of the Whitney extension succeeded? How can we continue to speculate further on possible extensions as this book suggests? Commonly, rejected projects disappear quickly and are soon completely forgotten. Few of them live a “social life” of their own and are displayed in exhibits or published in books as witnesses to architectural creativity. Yet, the Whitney’s architectural projects lived a turbulent life and stirred numerous debates over the last four decades, enrolling more and more protagonists, generating startling public effects, mobilizing communities of architects, neighbours, museum professionals and New Yorkers. To explain what went wrong with the Whitney building and its (always) impossible extensions, one cannot just concentrate on their designs (whatever their quality and formalistic expression) and continue to interpret and evaluate them according to a stylistic alphabet (modernist, classical elements, or others), or in terms of scale (fitting, not fitting, overwhelming) or function. After all these “battles” around the extensions, we cannot continue to interpret them in terms of their artistic language only or wrap them into a rhetoric that relies on strong symbolism. The compositional diagrams offered in this book continue the process of re-designing the Whitney. Based on “close

analytical-critical readings” of the museum architectural forms and volumes, as a series of operations through which the museum is studied by means of redesign, the experimentations presented here distil different aspects the Breuer’s poetics reading it as a puzzling text. Yet, the Whitney has proven to be a very recalcitrant and cacophonous “reading”. The formalistic manipulations offered in this book underline the absurdity of that very idea of treating the Whitney as a poetic text that makes sense, a symbolic object, mythological, enigmatic, puzzling. Nothing makes sense when we contemplate a static architecture object at a distance. To fully understand the Whitney, one needs to acknowledge the impossibility for its design to be read and deciphered; to consider also the proactive power of the architectural projects for its extension to mobilize different participants’ readings and voices, convincing, persuading or deterring them. To grasp the Whitney, we need to take into account the complexity of the very situation of its design and redesign – longitudinal, painstaking, enduring – making design inseparable from the effects it produces and the actions it triggers.

Thus, the experimentations presented in this book, demonstrate the power of design, not as a mere play of figuration and abstraction, but as an active process of recollecting and reinterpreting all the voices and social connections that tie us together. Far from serving as mere aesthetic representations, buildings and design projects are active participants in society. To counter-act the analytical-critical operations of the Eisenman-inspired “close readings” of the Whitney, a thorough understanding of the building could be reached if one can fully account for the series of situations in which both the Whitney and its projected extensions were designed: the interpretations of the different participants, their voices, their trajectories and positions, the different Whitney statements, the various effects they produced and how they went wrong. This will require challenging both the definitions of building as texts and the possibility to produce readings that makes sense in complex, puzzling and cacophonous social situations.

Note

1. I refer here to Appadurai’s term of “social life of objects”. He argues that things-in-motion, like human beings, have a “social life”, a career, a biography, and that material culture does not possess a stable identity, see Appadurai A., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.
2. For a detailed account on this history of extensions and the projects of OMA, see Yaneva A., *The Making of a Building: a pragmatist approach to architecture*, Peter Lang AG, Oxford, 2009.



Before moving permanently to another part of Manhattan, Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum of American Art was the subject of numerous attempts to expand it, including those by its author that show evidence of an architectural addition juxtaposed to the original building. The impossibility of enlarging an icon of modernity such as Breuer's Whitney becomes the pretext for a design experiment by the PhD in Theories of Architecture and Design involving a number of young scholars who confront the work in a close dialogue between critical reading and architectural writings of its transformation.

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