

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Critics Page

March 4th, 2014

A.F.A.M. / MOMA

by *Stephen Rustow*

It is no small irony that MoMA’s argument for demolishing the American Folk Art Museum and its critics’ argument for preserving it both hinge on the notion that the abandoned building is “bespoke,” an object of exceptional quality, made from scratch to the demands of a specific client. For MoMA, it is the building’s specificity as a unique design response to a program that no longer inhabits the site that renders the structure “useless,” or more properly, “unreutilizable.” For the building’s defenders it is this same specificity, in the building’s form and materials, that renders the A.F.A.M. a structure worth saving, even if its reuse were to encumber MoMA’s expansion plans. That both sides can proceed from the same characterization to diametrically opposed conclusions reflects an underlying disagreement about what museum architecture should be, leavened with the political expediency and bad faith that typifies the city’s high-stakes urbanism. But the debate also raises larger questions about how any museum building balances two competing imperatives, the first having to do with its programmatic mission and the second with how that mission is formally expressed in the fabric of the city.

MoMA’s argument for demolition implicitly makes the larger case that its own institutional mission—presenting and interpreting its collection to the widest possible public—should trump any given architectural constraint. This is the age-old argument for adaptability and flexible exhibition space in the service of an evolving collection, the future demands of which can never be fully anticipated. The MoMA campus itself is the best illustration of this program-driven conception of architectural merit: the iconic Goodwin-Stone building of 1939, arguably still today the symbolic face of the museum, has been remade on at least six occasions, with the wholesale redesign of its façades, radical reworking of its circulation, and a virtually endless reshuffling of galleries, shops, and restaurants throughout its loft-like bays. The banality of the original building and the simplicity of its construction, the argument goes, have allowed it to evolve, and its gallery spaces—white, evenly lit, flexible in layout, and flat in affect—have been systematically readapted to the dictates of its curators. This would seem a

resounding affirmation of the neutral architectural frame, the “off the rack” suit of clothes that can be tucked in or let out as fashions change and as the body institutional slowly bloats with age.

But curiously, during the last expansion MoMA chose to restore the 53rd Street façade and entrance lobby to their original 1939 design, which had been slowly effaced first by Philip Johnson in the '60s and '70s and then by Cesar Pelli & Associates in the '80s. Thus, a late Deco-Moderne aesthetic was carefully recreated in obsolete materials, with no programmatic justification and at enormous expense, to revive MoMA's original, symbolic representation of itself. Other bits of historical restoration were also folded into the general Yoshio Taniguchi redesign, including a new board room that carefully reinterpreted a lost and long-lamented earlier design by Johnson from the '60s. And such historicism still seems to be on the agenda: Diller Scofidio + Renfro have announced their intention to “restore” the full six-story run of the famous “Bauhaus,” not to satisfy any programmatic objective, but as a way of reinforcing the iconicity of the original Goodwin-Stone design. Here we have the spectacle of the museum curating its own historiography, even if it takes an ersatz reproduction to do it.

How the Folk Art building might best have been added to this mix is an open question. MoMA's opponents argue for Folk Art's status as architecture without reference to use and fall into two subgroups: those who insist that the building as a whole constitutes a work of art that must be kept intact, and those who concede that some accommodation to new use might be made to hold onto those parts of the design that seem “iconic” in their own right. The first group attacks MoMA as failing its institutional mission by not preserving and “collecting” the empty building as an intact architectural object, and then adapting its own expansion program to fit. The second group places the argument in a broader context and asserts that, taken as an urban artifact, not all parts of the Folk Art building have the same meaning: massing, exterior form, and especially façade matter more than use, interior volumes, and past programs. This position affirms that the exterior of the building shapes public space and that public space has a different and more widely shared importance than private use. As a consequence, the “preservation” of A.F.A.M. would actually entail a very careful disassembling and remaking of some of its parts, with new spaces and uses for MoMA designed behind a restored version of the artisanal bronze façade.

The most vociferous attack on this nuanced point of view has come from DS+R who dismiss it as “façadism,” a charge that is at once intellectually shallow and ignores the reality of how urban spaces evolve. New York abounds with buildings where exterior form continues to play a vital urban role even as internal use is changed beyond recognition, from Soho lofts to the Vuillard Houses to the base of Norman Foster's Hearst Tower. Indeed, DS+R's own extensive reworking of Alice Tully Hall is arguably the best recent local refutation of the façadism charge. Farther afield, throughout the cities of Europe, urban detritus is systematically put to renewed use, from Venice and Verona, with Carlo Scarpa's modernist projects tucked behind 15th-century palazzo façades and castle ruins, to Paris's *grands projets* of the '80s where a train station, a slaughterhouse, and a 17th-century *hôtel de ville* have all been successfully transformed into museums.

But the underlying tension between programmatic use and formal expression, whether bespoke or off the rack, also challenges how MoMA continues to interpret its mission, particularly its complicated relationship with contemporary art. Despite its merger with PS1 in 2000, MoMA has essentially evolved as a historical museum, showing works from a period it calls Modern, the definition of which has been repeatedly revised but rarely brought fully up to the present. Indeed, MoMA was always late to the party in exhibiting contemporary art: its 1929 inaugural exhibition *Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh*, reflecting the tastes of its founding matrons, showed works on average more than 30 years old. Seen in the context of the 1913 Armory Show, or Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen’s 291 Gallery exhibits of Matisse, Picasso, Duchamp, and Brancusi, all before 1917, MoMA’s debut seems downright timid. And arguably MoMA continued to play it safe well in to the 1960s, if not with every temporary exhibition then certainly in its choice of works for the permanent collection. Curiously, its recent commitment to the art of the present comes at a moment when New York City museum venues for contemporary art have never been more numerous; it still often looks as if MoMA is playing catch-up.

The spatial aesthetic of MoMA’s galleries has also generally reflected the historical epoch of the art on display, the galleries conceived essentially as period rooms, carefully designed to complement the works shown. This is evident in the drawing room sofas carefully placed in the faux-domestic spaces of the inaugural installation of 1929, and again in the larger, white-walled, gray carpeted rooms of the ’60s and ’70s, which resembled nothing so much as the commercial galleries of Castelli, Sonnabend, and Emmerich. Even the oft-criticized Taniguchi galleries reflect MoMA’s expressed desire for a cool but elegant interpretation of the same white box that in large measure reflects the corporate offices to which its board members are most accustomed. At each stage in its eight-decade institutional evolution, MoMA has known just what it wanted in its curatorial spaces, and just how to get it.

And so, it seems, it does now. MoMA’s insistence on demolishing the Folk Art ignores any consideration of the urban merits of the diminutive building’s façade or the potential richness that might result from preserving the historical lineup on 53rd Street as a kind of urban “exquisite corpse” of architectural moments. Renouncing any engagement with the complex reality of the city, MoMA seems, as ever, hell-bent on finding the largest blank canvas on which to project its latest version of historicism in the service of, once again, redefining the “Modern” moment.

CONTRIBUTOR**Stephen Rustow**

STEPHEN RUSTOW is a principal of Museoplan and Professor of Architecture at The Cooper Union; from 1999 to 2006 he directed the N.Y. architectural team on MoMA’s last expansion.

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